Wives left behind: A study of the impacts of men’s international labour migration on their wives in Bangladesh

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Wives left behind: A study of the impacts of men’s international labour migration on their wives in Bangladesh

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the results of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. All other sources are acknowledged by bibliographic references. This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree unless, as agreed by the University, for approved dual awards.
Abstract

Studies at the intersection of gender and labour migration have largely focused on female migrants. But in many developing countries, labour migrants remain predominantly male and their wives stay behind. Recently, the research focus has shifted to the left-behind community, but mostly with a quantitative research focus. This thesis addresses these gaps by placing women left behind at the centre of the focus, in the context of Bangladesh where international labour migration of the male population is prevalent. Using qualitative research methods, I examine the impacts of men’s migration on the everyday life and gender relations of their left-behind wives. I conducted 51 semi-structured interviews and participant observation over three months of fieldwork in two districts of Bangladesh: Bogura and Munshiganj. The former consists of remote villages, and the latter is suburban.

My analysis suggests that the village wives lead strictly circumscribed lives under the supervision of their in-laws. Patriarchal norms are reinforced and displayed in power relations between mothers and daughters-in-law, restrictions on wives’ physical mobility, and their dependency on non-migrant male kin. The concept of ‘respectable woman’ valo meye further curbs village wives’ physical autonomy. Data from suburban Munshiganj suggests that changes in patrilocal settings in the migrant households place fewer restrictions on wives physical mobility. Religious clothing such as Burkha is practised by both the village and suburban wives. Burkha facilitates suburban wives’ physical mobility, but it does not serve that purpose for the village wives. Overall, suburban wives exercise greater decision-making power compared to the village wives. However, this cannot be identified as a significant gain; like the village wives, suburban wives’ everyday activities are also monitored and controlled through phone conversations with their migrant husbands. Early marriages of teenage daughters are widely practised, and young women remain particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence in both village and sub-urban contexts. Data from the interviews with migrant men suggests that village men promote female ‘modesty’, madrassa education and early marriages for girls. Regardless of differences between the destination countries (e.g. Malaysia and Saudi Arabia), return migrant men claim that the Saudi version of Purdah (through the practice of Burkha) is best for the women.

The argument of the thesis is that the identity formation of ‘modern’ Muslim wives, in the milieu of men’s migration, does not convert to greater physical autonomy or decision-making power for the women. The thesis claims that men’s migration reinforces patriarchy and
facilitates ‘modern Islamic’ trends in Bangladesh, in favour of men only. Finally, my thesis highlights the need to shift focus from the economic advantages of labour migration (remittances) to the social cost of such gender selective labour migration. It concludes that improvement in the financial status of the households in the study does not necessarily imply the advancement of women’s status in the family or in the broader community.
List of Abbreviations

BSCIC- Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industrial Corporation
BMET- Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training
FDI- Foreign Direct Investment
ILO- International Labour Organization
IOM- International Organization for Migration
UN- United Nations
UNDP- United Nations Development Programme
UNEP- United Nations Environment Programme
Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis is an exploration of the impacts of men’s international labour migration on their left-behind wives in Bangladesh. Migration often occurs as a survival strategy for the significant proportion of the poorer households, in response to limited financial opportunities at home. Generally, the male head of household seeks work abroad, leaving behind an extended family of married women, their children, and their parents. The aim of this thesis is to gain a nuanced understanding of the economic, social and cultural challenges faced by the women in the context of their husbands’ prolong absence. Influenced by feminist research traditions, I conducted semi-structured interviews in two districts (including participant observation in one district) of Bangladesh to generate qualitative data for analysis. The 51 participants for semi-structure interviews are from poor and lower middle-class households, among them 36 are from rural Bogura and 15 from sub-urban Munshiganj. And 35 of them are left-behind wives, while 16 are migrant men (returnees and on leave).

Bangladesh is a low-middle income country in South Asia with heavily patriarchal cultural and social norms (Sultana et al. 2018; Amin and Pebley 1994; Goetz and Gupta 1996). Culture is an essential component for understanding the meaning given to individuals (gender), their actions (migration), and their relationships (network ties) (Curran and Saguy 2001). This in order affects the way inequality is created and reformed. While there has been substantial research on the positive economic impacts of migration and remittances on Bangladesh (Mahapatro 2016; Skider and Higgins 2017; Hadi 1999); there has been less research on how the left-behind women negotiate their everyday life in a strong patriarchal setting in the absence of male head of the family. To the best of my knowledge, there is very little qualitative research on left-behind women in Bangladesh. Bangladesh is experiencing a significant economic transformation due its readymade garment sectors and labour migration. However, men’s labour migration to Gulf countries, along with several geopolitical contexts (e.g. anti-Islamic sentiments in neighbouring India and in other non-Islamic countries) is also linked to growing Islamization in Bangladesh. In this transitional period, women’s public and private roles are constantly questioned and recreated. It is important to pay closer attention on how changes in gender relation occur and whether such changes improve women’s status. Particularly, the appeal of remittances through labour migration often blurs the impacts it creates on gender relation.
In this introductory chapter I begin by discussing what motivate me to conduct this research followed by an explanation of why researching the left-behind women in Bangladesh is relevant. I provide an overview of my main arguments before concluding by describing the structure of the thesis.

1.1. Motivation for the Study

Born and raised as middle-class Bangladeshi woman I experienced gender inequality and observed poverty around me on a regular basis. I have close male relatives who are labour migrants and I have seen the struggle of their wives from a personal perspective. Despite the privilege from my urban middle-class background, from an early age I learned that without the muscle and money of a male provider (father or husband), a woman is vulnerable to various from of injustice including sexual harassment and social discrimination.

Aside from this experience as a female growing up in Bangladesh and my personal link to some left-behind women, the recent changes that have been occurring in Bangladesh due to globalization and Islamization, motivated me to conduct this study. Today in Bangladesh, it is common for the majority of the poor and lower-middle class households to have at least one male member as labour migrant. Hence, in many families women are often left without husbands or fathers. While the national newspapers feature left behind women’s abuse either by their in-laws or by local judicial system (Salish) every now and then, detailed analysis on Bangladeshi left-behind women’s experience has remained poor in the migration literature. Given the context of women’s lower social and economic status compared to men in Bangladesh, it is crucial to focus on women who are left without men. Left-behind families are in a transitional period where they wait for the remittances that can help upgrade their economic and social status. It is important to study the women’s experiences in that waiting period and the challenges they face during that transitional time. And most importantly whether the newly gain status (after the economic improvement through men’s labour migration) is beneficial towards women’s advancement, requires a critical analysis. Hence, the motivation for this qualitative research is to explore this issue and to represent the voices of the left-behind women from Bangladesh whose experiences has often only numerically counted in previous quantitative studies.

1.2. Research Focus and Objectives
The focus of this research is to understand the impact of male labour migration on gender relation and women’s status in Bangladesh. This research brings together literature on migration, local patriarchal norms and Islamization process in Bangladesh to critically evaluate the status of women whose husbands (and fathers) are labour migrants. By looking at two different districts in Bangladesh, this study takes a qualitative approach to detail the nuanced experience of left-behind wives in varying contexts (rural and sub-urban). In the present context of Bangladesh where remittance through male labour migration is highly valued both at public and official levels, this study aims to shift the focus on the challenges faced by the women left behind.

A lot of the research (Ahmad 2012; Hossain and Akter 2010; Absar 2002) has focused on urban poor women’s labour force participation and rural poor women’s engagement in micro-credit loans programs (Karim 2008; Schuler et al. 1998). Female employment in ready-made garments factories has regarded as simultaneously emancipatory and highly exploitative (Feldman 2009) with pronounced gender wage gap in the sector (Huynh 2016). Similarly, exploitation and abuse of Bangladeshi female labour migrants are well recognized in both academic (Jureidini 2005; Manseau 2007; Fernandez 2014) and non-academic literature. However, the left-behind women have largely remained out of the focus. The left-behind women have remained out of the research focus in Bangladesh partly because, they are not perceived as the working poor. And often considered as relatively advantaged group as married women who do not have to earn a livelihood through physical labour. This stereotype against the migrants’ wives often hides the every-day life struggles these women experience. The majority of the migration studies have focused on the economic impact of migration on households, and women’s everyday life experiences were overlooked. I locate my study to fill this research gap. Exploratory research is necessary when very little is known about the topic being investigated, or about the context in which the research is to be conducted (Blaikie 2009, 52). My research provides an insight into this area of scholarship by studying the personal level experience of the left behind wives. I also believe this research has implications for policy development to assist the women left behind and to further advance women’s status in Bangladesh.
1.3. Research Question

This research answers the following central question:

**How does men’s labour migration affect the everyday lives of their left behind wives and gender norms in Bangladesh?**

This question incorporates three sub-questions. These are:

i. In what ways do left-behind women’s relations with extended family affect their mobility and decision-making power?

ii. Does women’s vulnerability to gender-based violence change when their husbands migrate? And do teen brides face particular challenges?

iii. To what extend does men’s migration influence their attitudes about gender roles? (e.g. attitudes towards women’s physical mobility and female education)

The research question reflects the overall aim of the thesis: to explore gender relation and women’s status in the context of men’s migration. The first sub question examines women’s relationship with extended family (e.g. in-laws) to map the impact on left behind wives’ physical mobility and decision-making power. The second sub question explores left behind women’s vulnerability to gender-based violence and specific challenges faced by the teen left-behinds. Finally, the third sub question investigates whether migration brings any changes in migrant men’s attitudes towards gender norms.

Based on my research findings I make three key arguments. First, male labour migration from Bangladesh promotes women’s stay at home roles and strengthens women’s lifelong dependency on male kin. Second, it reinforces local patriarchal norms and facilitates ‘modern’ Islamic trend to further curb women’s physical and social autonomy. It creates a ‘modern’ Muslim wife identity for the women which is not emancipatory. Third, it demotivates young men to pursue or continue education. This research shows that without participatory and meaningful education, migration induced wealth is unlikely to bring positive changes in gender norms and in women’s status in Bangladesh. Moreover, this research highlights the interconnectedness of local patriarchal culture and labour migration induced Islamization to contribute a deeper understanding of the current gendered landscape of Bangladesh.
1.4. Thesis Structure

Following this introduction and research questions, the second chapter discusses the context of migration from Bangladesh. It provides a brief description of the recent developments Bangladesh has made in poverty reduction and the role of remittances in it. It also recognizes the drawbacks of the dependency on remittance. The chapter discusses the key literature to identify that migrants from Bangladesh are predominantly male and un-skilled. It also briefly highlights the intersection for gender and migration, and how female labour migration from Bangladesh is stigmatized at cultural level and almost prohibited at official level.

The third chapter provides a literature review of patriarchal context in South Asia and a review of the existing literature on left-behind women. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section reviews the literature on patriarchy, the power relations between mothers and daughters-in-law under classic patriarchy, female autonomy, purdah and gender-based violence in such context. The second section reviews the literature on left-behind women around the world and limited literature on left-behind women from Bangladesh. These two sets of literature set out the conceptual framework of my research questions.

Chapter four describes the context of Islam in Bangladesh. It discusses the key literature on ambiguity between Bengali and Muslim nationalism and how women’s clothing style plays crucial roles in it. It highlights that religion (Islam) is politicised in Bangladesh and women’s public and private roles are largely affected in such context. I end this chapter by locating the position left behinds at the intersection of class and religion in current Bangladesh.

Chapter five discusses my research assumptions and methodology. I explain the research process and my experience of the fieldwork. I claim this study as feminist research, as left-behind women’s voices and experiences are core to this research. Migrant men are also interviewed to assess the status of the women left behind. I described the qualitative methods I used for my data collection, my access to fieldwork sites, my positionality and a note on the data analysis process. I also recognized limitations that resulted during my fieldwork.

Chapter six through nine set out the data analysis. Chapter six analyses the changes in the family structure to identify changes in left-behind women’s status. It addresses the key norms related to kinship system such as cousin marriages and son preferences in the migrant households. While the data analysis in both chapter six and seven, are related to the first sub question, the chapter seven particularly addresses the first sub question. It explores how left-
behind wives’ relation with their in-laws affect the wives’ physical mobility and decision-making power. It also compares left-behind wives’ autonomy in successful and unsuccessful migrant households, wives’ daily phone conversation with the migrant husbands and the practice of *Burkha*, which largely affect the wives’ physical mobility.

Chapter eight focuses on the vulnerability of left-behind wives to gender-based violence and narrates the experience of teen left-behind wives, to answer the second sub question. The chapter highlights the unjust practices such as stigma related to divorce for women and shame attached to sexual harassment which remain intact in the context of men’s migration. Migrants’ wives often are main target of gossip, which affect their mental wellbeing. A strong link between men’s migration and teen marriage is identified, and teen left-behinds are required to leave education after their marriage.

Chapter nine addresses the third sub question to identify changes in migrant men’s attitudes towards gender norms. I argue the village migrants keenly promote ‘female modesty’, *madrassa* education and early marriage for their daughters. Sub-urban men prioritise female education but speak in the same language as the village men regarding women’s ‘modesty’, *Purdah* and *madrassa* education.

Finally, chapter ten synopsizes the theoretical and empirical contributions of this research and addresses the principal research question. It summarises the key findings and arguments that enhance the understanding of the gendered impact of labour migration. I conclude that the impact of labour migration on gender relation in Bangladesh is largely negative and it cannot be promoted as a means of sustainable development.
Chapter 2: Migration and Bangladesh Context

Introduction

In this chapter my focus is to locate the base of this research. I begin by detailing the historical links that people from the Bengal delta had with migration, and the various reasons that trigger men to migrate from the present-day Bangladesh. The first half of the chapter explores the ambivalent nature of migration, for example, a mixed feeling of satisfaction (in terms of remittances) and distress (e.g. dealing with illegal brokers, exploitation by foreign employers etc.). Next, I explain the major destination countries for the labour migrants from Bangladesh. In this segment, I also discuss the core literature that claim migrants from Bangladesh are predominantly males and less-skilled who cannot bring their spouses to their destination countries. This fact places the foundation of this thesis which is a focus on the left-behind women.

In the second half of the chapter, I explore how gender intersects with migration. I briefly analyse the literature on feminization of migration, to examine if this framework can be used to understand the context of women who are barred from labour force participation. Finally, I highlight the government’s policies and social attitudes that stigmatize female labour migration from Bangladesh. It also signposts why women are barred from labour migration while men are provided with greater social and financial support to migrate.

2.1. Migration from Bangladesh: Past and Present

Throughout history the people of Bangladesh have relied on migration to cope with political turmoil and economic disruptions. Known as East Bengal during colonial period it became East Pakistan in 1947 and a sovereign state as Bangladesh only in 1971; these transitions suggest an unstable political territory which compels its people to migrate (Gardner 2009, 233). Although, before the creation of the state of Bangladesh in 1971, international migration from the region was quite inadequate because of the limitations placed ‘on the overseas travel of Bangladeshis by the Pakistani government, through such measures as the denial of passports to them’ (Kibria 2008, 521). During 16th Century ‘Portuguese, Dutch and British trading companies shaped the society and economy of the Bengal delta’ followed by Mughal Empire (1612 to 1757) who introduced an ‘aristocratic territorial system which launched feudal labour relation: land control in the hands of large landholders’ (Etzold 2015, 2). The route from feudalism to capitalism was considered by the exclusion of ‘ruined peasants and destitute artisans from the rural areas; and
with expansion of capitalism the labour force became more of a commodity’ followed by abolition of rural ties and farming (Lefebvre 1999, 11). Up to now, land ownership is the ground of social inequality and fundamental reason behind migration from Bangladesh. ‘Landless labourers are often (forced to be)’ more portable than families that regulate and nurture a substantial size of land (Etzold 2015, 2).

However, studies show that to facilitate migration one requires to be in possession of lands or certain amount of wealth. Rao and Hossain’s (2012, 422) research on migration and mobility from Bangladesh suggests, individuals most of the time have to sell their lands or borrow money from friends and relatives for visa and plane tickets. This signifies a trend in migration pattern: internal and international migration, the latter requires more resources. Individuals who are able to manage the visa and airfare cost prefer migrating abroad whereas, landless people or individuals with limited resources migrate to Dhaka the capital city of Bangladesh for jobs opportunities in garments and in other sectors. Although, ‘for men, a few years in Dhaka is a steppingstone to emigration to the Middle East’ (Rao 2012, 29). Similar evidence has been suggested by Valentin (2012, 439) on Nepalese male migrants who do not visualise Delhi, India ‘as a final destination but a gateway to’ migrate to other countries after requiring required skills and money. Three key traits have affected migration pattern in Bangladesh since 1980s: ‘the export of labour migration to the Gulf State, rise of Bangladesh’s garments industry spurring internal migration, and disruptions of rural livelihoods by natural hazards’ (Etzold and Mallick 2015, 2).

Bangladesh has made progress in major sectors, but such developments are not sustainable. It has marked significant development in ‘primary education, population control, reduction of hunger’ and is no more introduced as ‘least developed country’ in the world (Kibria 2011, 1; Etzold and Mallick 2015, 1). According to UNDP (2016), Bangladesh has seen a ‘major economic transformation’ in recent years, growing an average 6.3% between 2011-15, and 7.1% in the 2016 fiscal year. Poverty has declined from 31.5% of the population in 2011 to 24.7% in 2015 below the national poverty line (Lewis and Hossain 2018). In 2015 Bangladesh’s Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina wins the United Nation’s highest environmental prize, as her government prepares the ecologically fragile country fit to challenge the hazardous effects it faces from climate change (UNEP 2015).

Regardless of these notable developments, this predominantly rural country still suffers from prevalent poverty, unemployment, environmental hazards and ‘people’s purchasing power is a
lot smaller than in India or Sri Lanka’ (Kibria 2011, 1; Etzold and Mallick 2015, 1). Major challenges remain with high levels of extreme poverty (12.9% of the total population in 2015-16), along with growing inequality and increasing vulnerability (Lewis and Hossain 2018, 27). Poverty and oversized population which contribute to lack of job opportunities play as catalyst for migration. Women remain disadvantaged in terms of earnings (52% lower than men’s) and labour market participation (34% as opposed to 82% for men); women’s low economic status is reflected in high levels of gender-based violence (Lewis and Hossain 2018, 27). Bangladesh also has the fourth highest rate of child marriage in the world, democracy and governance are still deeply problematic, with low levels of civic participation and high levels of corruption (147th out of 167 according to Transparency International) (Lewis and Hossain 2018).

2.1.1. The ambiguous nature of migration: remittances and migrants’ dependency on social network

Poverty and physical portability are strictly interdependent, and migration emerges as income and living policy for the impoverished people of every state (Berner 2000, 556). A universal fact is migration and remittances decrease ‘rural poverty and contribute to the improvement of household living standards’ (Ishtiaque and Ullah 2013, 45). Evidence seems to underpin this factor. According to World Bank’s (2014) report in 2013, remittances were significantly higher than foreign direct investment (FDI) to developing countries and were three times larger than official development assistance. Remittances have given rise to a decline in the poverty headcount ratio by six percentage points in Bangladesh during 1990-2006 (World Bank 2006). Remittances sent by Bangladeshi migrants through official channels reached a record level of US$13 billion in 2013 (Ahmed et al. 2015, 2).

Nevertheless, this positive inflow of remittances does not necessarily mitigate the uncertainties that migration brings, particularly for the family left-behind. In many cases, remittances do not reach to migrants’ family directly. As prominent economist Dilip Ratha (2014) refers, a Bangladeshi labour in Dubai had to send his hard-earned money to the illegal recruitment agent or broker (who found the job abroad for the migrant) while the wife and children of the migrant eagerly waited for that money. Prospective migrants are extremely helpless to manipulation by brokers ‘who fake documents, withhold the migrant’s passport or charge illegal costs’ (Kern and Muller-Boker 2015, 161).

However, Kern and Muller-Boker (2015, 161-163) also argue, for Nepalese migrants going to brokers is not only the better decision but in many cases also the only one, as obtaining the
right documents though an official way is ‘time-consuming, costly, complicated and prone to corruption’. Similarly, Rahman (2011, 12-13) suggests that while the ever-rising costs of recruitment have made it challenging for potential poor migrants to secure jobs in Gulf States; brokers, in Bangladesh known as ‘dalal’ or ‘adam-babshahi’ (human-trader) who are generally previous migrants living in the gulf countries for a significant period of time, use their access to local recruitment and visa structure to generate affordable employment for a growing number of Bangladeshis in Gulf countries. Yet, the exploitation of particularly female migrants at the hand of these brokers is not negligible (Siddiqui 2001; Lim and Oishi 1996, 90; Pollock and Aung 2010). While, the unfair relationship between the migrants (both male and female) and recruitment agent has widely recognized in migration studies, similar exploitive relation between migrants’ families and the brokers, has not been explained broadly. Particularly, in Bangladesh where married men migrate leaving behind their vulnerable wives and children.

Migrants’ dependency on social ties both before and after the migration create mixed outcomes. The decision to migrate is normally taken within a large social group and not simply by an isolated individual; ‘prepaid tickets purchased for the potential migrant by friends or family is a sign of the collective nature of the migration decision-making process’(Gardener and Osella 2003, viii; Kivisto and Faist 2009, 39). A powerless villager in Bangladesh may be unfortunate in financial capital but is often rich in social resources and ‘the beauty of social capital is that it is convertible into other forms of capital such as financial capital or access to overseas employment’ (Rahman 2011, 13). However, this can also reinforce the existing hierarchies in the community (Lefebvre 1999, 117-214). Migration at times expands the boundaries between individual ambitions and wider social responsibilities (Osella and Osella 2000, 124-125). Community people tend to judge a migrant’s status upon his return and evaluate his social and financial contributions to the village (Osella and Osella 2000, 124-125). The exploitive power relation can remain intact when an unsuccessful migrant cannot pay off all his debts to the people who lent him the money while going abroad. The effects on women and on gender relation in such situation is vague.

For many migrants, migration is not just a livelihood strategy but a learning process of life lesson which is beyond any institutional learning. Afsar (2000) proposes in her research that Bangladeshi migrants profit more than non-migrants because of their inventive, courageous and determined nature. For Bangladeshi male migrants, ‘migration is considered both a form of learning and a step toward gaining respectability’ (Rao and Hossain 2012, 417). Male migrants from Nepal learn the value of social capital and importance of developing a support
network and to navigate different learning and work environments under condition of insecurity and structural constraints (Valentin 2012, 430). Economically, migrants prosper in wealth, income which facilitate ‘greater access to public services and education’ (Hossain 2001, 3). If migrant men experience such spiritual and material progress, what consequences this brings for women in the family, particularly those who do not go through migratory process requires further research.

2.1.2. Temporary less-skilled workers outflow the migration pattern from Bangladesh

Bangladesh is one of the major suppliers of migrant labour. It sends migrant workers to 157 countries, where the major destinations are in Middle East along with large flows to Southeast Asia —particularly to Malaysia and Singapore (Ahmed et al. 2015, 2). It is well established that better off and highly educated Bangladeshis migrate to the US, UK or other Western countries for long term settlement (in most of the cases) whereas, less skilled Bangladeshis temporarily migrate to middle East and South East Asia; and the latter outnumbers the first category (Siddiqui 2003, 1; Kibria 2011, 2; Etzold 2015, 2). From 1976 to 2008, semi-skilled workers such as tailors and masons comprised 16 percent of outflows, while professionals such as doctors, engineers, teachers, and nurses constituted just 2.9 percent (Kibria 2011, 4). It denotes that migration from Bangladesh is predominantly the temporary contract migration of less skilled workers.
Figure 2.1: Category wise overseas employment in 2018 from Bangladesh

The above figure from the Bangladesh Government website of BMET (Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training) shows that in 2018 the highest number of migrations from Bangladesh was of less-skilled migrants with 48.15%, while professionals migrate just as minimum as 2.03%.

Research on migration studies from South Asia and Northern Africa shows that adult men are more prone to migrate than other individuals of the society (Hossain 2001, 2; Abusharaf 1997, 522; Singh and Yadava 1981, 33-46). According to the National Population and Housing Census, 2.8 million Bangladeshi household members were living abroad in 2011 and 95 percent of them were men (Etzold and Mallick 2015, 3). A highlighted finding of parallel research from South Asia also suggests that unschooled or less skilled married migrants are not accompanied by family members, as compared to highly educated migrants (Singh & Sharma 1984, 168;
Singh & Yadava 1981, 33-46). Temporary migrants generally cannot bring their families to the country in which they work and reside (Rudnick 2009, 19). Hence, wives of a large number of less skilled migrants stay as left behind women in migrant sending countries such as Bangladesh. There is scant qualitative research on how migration of husbands has influenced these women’s socio-economic status and everyday life in the context of Bangladesh.

One of the key characteristics of less skilled labour migration is its impermanent tenure. Most of the contemporary migration flows within Asia are temporary or circular in nature (Piper 2006). The point that these migrants are still mentioned as ‘household members’ and not as ‘emigrants’ in the National Population and Housing Census of Bangladesh, signposts the temporary nature of these labour movements (Etzold and Mallick 2015, 3). The inevitable return to home country can have drastic consequences for the migrant. Migration to gulf countries can offer to some ‘the chance of rapid accumulation of wealth but Gulf migrants cannot settle away, sooner or later they must return home’ to rediscover their social status (Osella and Osella 2000, 119). It is not unanticipated that a large number of migrant workers from various destination countries return to Bangladesh every year after the completion of their contracts and visa- passport related issues (Ahmed et al. 2015, 2). Their reestablishment in the community and how it affects gender relation, require further research.

2.1.3. Working abroad to homecoming: Integration abroad and reintegration in home country

While migrants often have to deal with unethical recruitment agents or brokers (dalal) in home county; once abroad, the vulnerability of the migrants is heightened even further. A key reason behind this is migrants’ dependency on the foreign employers who have officially sponsored them (Kibria 2008, 522). In Dubai, migrants own no freedom and provided with minor recourse when faced with an undesirable situation (Fattah 2006). The ill treatment towards Bangladeshi labours in the Gulf countries is not unfamiliar to the rest of the world. Bangladeshi labourers are known as miskin (beggars) in the Gulf and the malicious abuse (Physical torture including kicking, hitting and throwing stones) towards them is often higher compared to that of towards other South Asian migrants; few even purposely disguise their Bangladesh origins by speaking only Urdu or Arabic when in Public (Kibria 2008, 522). Although, Kern and Muller-Boker (2015, 160) suggest in Qatar, Nepalese migrants receive the lowest salaries, also in comparison to workers from Bangladesh and India. The study, however, does not mention any form of physical abuse towards Nepalese migrants in Qatar. Nonetheless, such abuse and manipulation
of labour migrants are not supplementary to specific nationality and gender, but intensely connected to migrants’ class and social status in both sending and receiving countries. As professional migrants (e.g. accountants, engineers) face no experience of harassment or discrimination, which reveals the ‘deeply class-inflected character of Bangladeshi stigmatization in the United Arab Emirates’ (Kibria 2008, 528).

Challenged by such unpleasantly rough working situation at the destination, South Asian male migrants rely on their home, women’s faithfulness and nurturing labour, seeking a balance in their lives and a defence against the oddities of the market (Sangari 2002; Chopra et al. 2004). Male migrants are portrayed as ‘suffering and selfless men of faith’, sacrificing homely comfort to sufficiently provide for their families (Gardner and Osella 2003, xvii; Rao 2012, 31). This invites a parallel response of sacrifice from the women for the sake of their families’ welfare (Rao 2012, 31). Bangladeshi male labour migrant desire polite, obeying and good-looking wives who can be their confidantes; return migrants from Saudi Arabia prefer their wives to be like Saudi women practicing veil and staying in home (Rao 2012, 32). Gender practices can be strikingly different between Gulf and East Asian Countries (Singapore, South Korea and Malaysia). How return Bangladeshi male migrants from South East Asian countries perceive gender roles has remained largely unexplored.

If women’s loyalty back home has been a token of comfort for migrant men, another has been religion. Migration can disorder ‘worldviews and ideas and many of the bases of community and support that were available to the migrants before their movement’ (Kibria 2008, 519). Hence, migrants may turn to religion for relief and support, finding in it a force to cope with the dislocations of the migration experiences (Smith 1978; Warner 1998). Muslim migrants are appeared with a more recognisable commitment to religion, many Bangladeshi and Sudanese migrants while working Saudi Arabia, perform Hajj (an annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca) before returning to the home countries (Kibria 2008, 525; Abusharaf 1997, 517). While drinking alcohol in expensive bars and wearing branded clothes become essential features of the formation of new identities for South Indian Christian return migrants (Osella and Osella 2000, 122), South Asian Muslim return migrants are likely to involve acts of piety, through prayers and dress and charitable contributions to mosques and Islamic schools (Kibria 2008, 520; Rao and Hossain 2012, 414). However, it is interesting to note that while acknowledging the ill treatment by Arabs in Gulf countries as un-Islamic (Kibria 2008, 525), upon return the Muslim migrants engage in a more orthodox or purist, modernised form of Islam which rejects the saints and shrines of the old order (Kibria 2008, 519; Gardner and
Osella 2003, xv). What impact this has on the existing gender-norms in migrants’ native land, requires further research.

Everyday religious norms and consumption practices of migrants’ families often act as symbol of social identities. As migrants and their families reinvent themselves as high status members of their communities, how they worship and how they spend their earnings tend to take centre stage (Gardner and Osella 2003, xv). However, for an unsuccessful return migrant the situation can be different. Religious reformism is again part of a process of social mobility and linked to a claim to modernity, here ‘modern’ resides in the styles and practices of wealthy Gulf States (Gardner and Osella 2003, xvi). In Bangladesh, the visible rise of women’s veiling (a signal of religious orthodoxy) to be related to the cultural strategies of returned migrants from the Middle East (Siddiqi 2006). Thus, while wealthy return migrants can shape community practices, for failed return migrants readjustment within the community can be problematic. It remains to analyse if existing gender norms are modified in economically successful and unsuccessful migrant households in Bangladesh.

Next, I shift the attention to the intersection of gender and migration.

2.2. Gender and Migration

Cultural meanings about what is deemed masculine and feminine, and what is not, vary from one society to another and from one generation to another (Macionis and Plummer 2012, 390; Rudnick 2009, 20; Grieco and Boyd 1998, 3). Gendered social relations are not constant, clearly demarcated but, reconstructed by people in their local and global everyday interactions (Rudnick 2009, 20; Grieco and Boyd 1998, 3). However, gender comprises much more than differences and interactions; ‘it also involves power and hierarchy, because in most societies men enjoy a disproportionate share of most social resources’ (Macionis and Plummer 2012, 392). If men and women were provided with equal positions in the society and accounted for parallel societal and behavioural presumptions, it would have been redundant to speak of gender (Rudnick 2009, 20).

Numerous immigration studies have been directed, overlooking the gender order in the world (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1999, 566; Mahler & Pessar 2006, 28). Gender has still not successfully been integrated into the mainstream of migration studies, ‘women’ are mostly added or relegated to chapters of ‘family and household’ and ‘gender’ is still equated with ‘women’ (Schwenken and Eberhardt 2008, 16; Donato et al. 2006, 10). When gender has been
incorporated, female migrants and feminization of migration have drawn attention in migration literature. With the exception of some quite recent work in specific areas, there are few studies that focus on women migrants in the context of politics and civic life, and even fewer that include a more nuanced study of gender (Piper 2006, 134). However, far too little attention has been paid on how gender relations have evolved when male members of the community migrate, and females stay behind. It remains to be seen if the framework for feminization of migration can be employed to understand the circumstances of women who do not migrate.

### 2.2.1. Feminization of labour migration

Since the 1980s, studies on current streams of migration have increasingly recognised and emphasized a wide range of concerns ‘related to one of the key features of contemporary migration flows today: its feminization’ (Piper 2006, 140; Standing 1989, 1077). Global factories reproduce models of organization wherein women dominate lowest levels both of pay and authority, whereas men occupy most positions of supervisory and managerial rank (Ong 1991, 289); often by reinventing male and racial superiority (Elson & Pearson 1981; Ong 1985; Warren & Borque 1987). This dominant capacity of patriarchal norms to define women’s labour as not only ‘cheap’ but also socially and economically worthless, that provides a gendered labour force vital to the accumulation strategies of global capital (Wright 1999; 1601). Young women in the newly industrialized countries in Asia, have been socially and economically oppressed for so long that they are more prepared to work for low wages for long work weeks (Standing 1989, 1080). Migrant women are preferred worldwide as workers in the export oriented industrial sectors as well as in the service sector because they are cheaper than local workers or male migrants (Dannecker 2005, 656). The promotion of women’s employment and mobility may be desirable, but this is surely not the way to achieve it (Standing 1989, 1082).

Cross-border movement of labour migrants between countries is accompanied by a clear gender bias, as women dominate in certain sectors (e.g. care provider, household, sex/entertainment) (Piper 2006, 142). These are also the jobs seen as suitable for women because they are associated with the ‘characteristics of docility, obedience and caringness traditionally ascribed to women, in particular Asian Women’ (Lim & Oishi 1996, 91). These occupations are built on gendered assumptions of women’s innate affinities to work in the reproductive sphere and hence not encouraging to destabilizing the gender norms about the division of labour in the household, but rather reinforcing gender hierarchies (Morokvasic 2004).
heightened emphasis on feminine beauty, fashion and commodified leisure activities associated with wage work can similarly position workers as feminized consumers rather than as productive and valuable labourers (Freeman 2000; Lynch1999; Mills 1999).

Population aging and the entry of native women into the professional workforce in the first world countries create demand in female-dominated employment sectors (Healthcare, domestic work) that native workers are reluctant to fill ( Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2003; Lim & Oishi 1996, 91), creating highly feminized and ethnically isolated occupational roles (Del Rio & Alonso- Villar 2012). Thus, Caribbean nannies in New York (Colen 2009), Filipina care givers in Rome (Parrenas 2000), Sri Lankan maids in Saudi Arabia (Gamburd 2000) – all provide a feminised and racialized support structure for more privileged households (Mills 2003, 45).

Yet, migration often allows women to exercise agency. An increasing amount of literature accounts that many women of discrete nationalities and varied host countries seek to maintain and deepen personal gains achieved through migration by prolonging their households’ stays abroad (Pessar 1986; Chavez 1992; Mills 2003, 49). Hence, the autonomy experienced by these less privileged migrant women in their destination countries is often more desirable to them regardless their status as feminized, racialized workers. Mexican and Caribbean women in the United States often find that they are much more reluctant than their male compatriots to return to the home country, believing that it would likely entail a parallel return to more patriarchal household relation (Goldring 2001; Honagneu-Sotelo 1994, 1000; Levitt 2001, 104-6), where being an autonomous woman is associated with negative traits such as ‘excessive’ modern or ‘selfish’ purchaser of personal adornment (Mills 2003, 49).

Yet, the concept that migration empowers women, has been criticized in several studies. Migration itself does little to change gender inequality, and the connection between migration, employment, and female independence is not necessarily direct and unidirectional (Donato et al. 2006, 20). The emancipatory effects of female migration are being rooted more in a Northern-Western notion of superiority and orientalism (‘oppressed women migrate out of patriarchal cultures’) (Schwenken and Eberhardt 2008, 20), ignoring local empowering process for the women. Since, what empowers women may vary across countries and cultures. Female migration may increase or decrease gender inequalities or leave them essentially unaltered because, women’s participation in economic exchanges does not automatically ensure their authority over decision making process (Tienda & Booth 1991, 69). Views that migration advances women’s positions are predicted on assumptions that geographical movement involves shifts from more to less oppressive environments, and participation in market activity
ensures greater authority and autonomy in the redistribution of family resources (Morokvasic 1984). Alternatively, theories that migration deteriorates women’s position are based on evidence of fewer opportunities for female employment (Boserup 1970); lesser control over earnings and reduced participation in family decision making (Beneria and Roldan 1987); and the interruption of family relations through separation and divorce (Morokvasic 1984). While majority of the research has been done on whether migration advances or erodes female migrants’ socio-economic position, there has been a lack of debates in the migration literature on how women’s social positions change in the communities that permit only men to migrate. In those communities, whether men’s migration empowers or disempowers women who stay behind, requires qualitative research to accumulate such nuanced details regarding changes in women’s everyday life.

### 2.2.2. Migration as female responsibility and male opportunity

When gender order appears to alternate for instance, when women leave their family to earn a livelihood, they employ a range of strategies that make them look adhering to norms of motherhood and family-life (Schwenken and Eberhardt 2008, 21). By going abroad and sending remittances to her family she may regard herself as a good mother who cares for her children by sacrificing herself (Morokvasic 2007). In some cases, unmarried migrant women are advised to get married and bring their husbands with them in the destination countries. Gallo’s (2006, 360) research on Malayali migrant women in Italy suggests that families were particular to ensure that ambiguities and gossip surrounding the position of daughters working abroad should be dissipated through reunion with her husband. Hence, female migrants are often under constant pressure from their social network to promote the ‘feminine’ aspects of their work and life after migration.

Whereas men’s migration is perceived as a way of learning from new opportunities, women’s migration is imagined ‘in ways that reinforce traditional feminine roles and expectations by downplaying issues of choice and agency and stressing the importance of female sacrifice (Hofmann and Buckley 2013, 529). As Hofmann and Buckley’s (2013, 529) research on migration from Georgia shows, men’s migration is just not about money and work, but also about seeing a new country. Similarly, Bangladeshi and Nepalese male migrants gain experiences of making social contacts and new skills that are required in global platforms (Rao and Hossain 2012,417; Valentin 2012, 430). But for female migrants, focus on self-sacrifice,
hinders the opportunities for women to use migration as a means of human capital development, investment, or personal enhancement (Hofmann and Buckley 2013, 529).

While men’s role as lead provider in the family is established virtually in all countries or cultures, migration plays a slightly different role in distinct national men’s motivation to migrate. For example, Georgian men may experience higher incentives to migrate than women, to maintain their status as breadwinners (Hofmann and Buckley 2013, 525); whereas, in South Asian countries, mobility of young men is encouraged as part of their transition to adulthood (Sharma 2008; Osella and Osella 2000, 120). Osella and Osella (2000, 122) state, that ‘migration is a means of bridging a gap between young immature status and manhood for South Indians’. Similarly, Valentin (2012, 437) cites a Nepalese proverb in her research on migration from Nepal that ‘a son who has not gone abroad and a daughter who has not gone to a husband’s house are considered abnormal.’ This notion of men’s migration for work and women’s journey to in-laws’ house after marriage, is widely believed and practiced in other South Asian countries including Bangladesh. Research findings from Bangladesh show that parents even finance the migration of potential son in-law despite the recognition of mental and physical separation for the couple during initial years of marriage (Rao 2012, 30). This also indicates that Bangladeshi men are provided with greater support for migration than women.

2.2.3. State policies and social attitudes in the context of female migration

In general, although more women are migrating than in the past, traditional explanations for men’s migration do not apply to women (Donato et al. 2006, 12). Decisions to migrate are made within a larger context of gendered interactions and expectations between individuals and within families and institutions (Donato et al. 2006, 12). It is frequently the households or families who determine which members of the domestic unit will migrate and how their contributions will fit into the household’s economy (Pessar 1982; Wood 1982; Boyd 1989). To clarify, why some villages or regions transfer men, while others transfer women, and to explain why some cities, counties, or nations attract more women or men involves ‘careful attention both to gendered access to education and to gendered divisions of labour in sending and receiving-country labour markets, as well as to the gendered dimensions of state regulations of the mobile’ (Donato et al. 2006, 21). Gender is a vital component in decision making process for individuals to migrate from the communities where women’s labour force participation is not encouraged.
In South Asian and Arab countries, where religious beliefs and cultural practices sustain a strong impact on the social position and movement of women, female labour migration is not respected (Lim & Oishi 1996, 88-89). In Sudan, low percentage of females, particularly Muslim women, was due both to social values and official policy that largely restrict women from migrating without the permission of a male guardian (Abusharaf 1997, 522). Related conclusions on Muslim women elsewhere support the observation that they migrate only as family members and rarely as single persons (Galaleldin 1988). Whereas socio-cultural perspectives in Southeast Asian countries and Sri Lanka have allowed young, even unmarried women to travel overseas to work (Lim & Oishi 1996, 88). Restrictions on the overseas employment of certain categories of female workers, generate diverse implications across countries. Authorities in the Philippines and Thailand have created ways of exempting many categories of women from official prohibitions against their employment abroad (Abella 1995).

On the other hand, ‘in countries such as Bangladesh and Pakistan where the labour force participation of women has been constrained by social norms and values, formal restrictions have only reinforced society’s tendency to keep women at home’ (Abella 1995, 242).

Bangladesh belongs to a group of countries including India, Pakistan and Nepal- that has restricted women’s emigration in order to ‘protect women’; in these countries, men’s labour migration is strongly encouraged and put forward by sending governments as an economic development strategy (Belanger and Rahman 2013, 357). In Bangladesh, international labour migration for women was banned by the government several times between 1981 and 1998; only those accompanied by their husbands were allowed to work as domestics in Western Asian countries (Belanger and Rahman 2013, 359; Lim and Oishi 1996, 104). Such government policies have not prevented Bangladeshi female workers emigrating abroad, but have contributed to irregular migration and, to a large extent, made potential women migrants vulnerable to poor working conditions and trafficking (Siddiqui 2003, 9). The law also reflects the social stigma of female employment abroad (Etzold and Mallick 2015). An important change has been the withdrawal of restrictions for unskilled female labour migrants in 2003 (Etzold and Mallick 2015; Belanger and Rahman 2013, 359). Since the withdrawn of the ban of female labour migration, Bangladeshi female workers have started migrating but not significantly. In 2008, Bangladeshi women’s share in migration outflows increased only 9%, while in the Philippines and Sri Lanka over half of the migrant workers were women (BMET 2017; Martin 2008). However, the share of women in Bangladesh’s overseas labour force increased fast from only eleven percent in 1994 to 34 percent upsurge in 2014 (Etzold and
Mallick 2015) and 36 percent in 2015 (BMET 2017). Given the number of Bangladeshi unskilled or less-skilled female migrants, why many Bangladeshi women are still not migrating as labour workers will lead one to the social attitudes towards female labour migration. This is discussed next.

### 2.2.4. Stigmatization of female labour migration from Bangladesh

Abroad travels by the solo females without male guardians are still considered atypical and not appreciated in Bangladeshi culture. In Bangladeshi communities, it is often assumed by relatives and neighbours that female migrants are sexually harassed by their employers or worked as sex workers to earn more money while abroad (Belanger and Rahman 2013, 361). A similar criticism by community members is that women must have lived adulterous or promiscuous lives abroad (Rudnick 2009, 256; Dannecker 2005, 660). Dannecker’s (2005, 660) research on Bangladeshi labour migrants in Malaysia, shows that Bangladeshi male migrants despise their fellow Bangladeshi female workers; the men claim that women mix with men from different countries, moving around freely and thus violating the norms and values of purdah while in Malaysia, and have occupied spaces that have created for men. These men also state that they would never allow female members of their families to migrate (Dannecker 2005). This also suggests that women face more obstacles to migrate from a family a man has already migrated as labourer. Although, Bangladeshi female migrants can be more efficient at work abroad compared to their male counterparts. As International Labour Organization’s (ILO) survey shows more Bangladeshi women 43.80 % of all workers received training before migration compared to 38.03 % of the male respondents (Ahmed et al. 2015, 19).

Similar attitudes towards female labour migration is found in Indonesia where men demean women’s labour force participation. Elmhirst’s (2004, 97) ethnographic work in Indonesia suggests:

In the face of the feminisation of migration and employment, the young men’s perception of their economic, cultural and social ‘lack’ relative to young women becomes a source of community conflicts. Although the young men adopt rhetorical strategies to devalue the urban jobs held by young female migrants, men were unable to totally subvert the value associated with modernity and financial autonomy – historically crucial for claims to masculinity – conferred by migration. Instead, they resorted to aggressive means such as gambling and low-level sexual harassment to reclaim masculinity.
Likewise, Gallo’s (2006, 362) research in Kerala, South India suggests, wives’ prolong absence undermine masculinity through reference to such men’s lack of control over their wife’s sexuality.

Bangladeshi woman’s labour migration not only damages her status, but also negatively affects her family’s reputation in the society. Guardians of male migrants proudly mention the successful journeys of the migrants, whereas, families are very reluctant to speak about their female family members abroad, or they even try to hide the fact that female members have lived or currently live and work abroad (Dannecker 2005, 660). This feeling of humiliation for female migrants’ family is universal, regardless women’s successful and unsuccessful migration status. As Belanger and Rahman’s (2013, 367) research on Bangladeshi female migrants suggests, community people and particularly husbands of the migrant women speculate that women cannot survive in abroad without being sexually exploited. Women who had been to abroad and were living without a husband after their return were regarded as a threat to the social order of their communities in Bangladesh (Rudnick 2009, 256).

However, since the low skilled Bangladeshi women have allowed to work abroad, female migration has increased (Etzold and Mallick 2015), few leading newspapers in the country even claim that the stigmatization of female labourer has eliminated. Female migrants are not just contributing financially, but also actively taking part in the decision-making process with their male counterparts and have gained the support from their community (Dhaka Tribune 2016). Yet, the fact that more women are staying and not migrating (BMET 2018)\(^1\), indicates that the change towards stigmatization of female migration is not substantial. In the light of above discussion, one may assume that Bangladeshi women who do not challenge the traditional gender norms by not migrating but staying behind are naïve or voiceless. Yet, how they negotiate their everyday life in patriarchal society while husbands are away, may suggest opposing views. Moreover, patriarchy itself can have diverse implication based on the contexts such as rural-urban, educational level, religious practices etc. I turn to the literature on the patriarchal context of Bangladesh in the next chapter.

\(^1\) In 2018 female migrants constituted 13% of the total flow of the year.
Conclusion

Bangladesh has experienced major economic transformation and significant gain in poverty reduction since its independence in 1971. However, the gains are not sufficient for an oversized population and hence, labour migration emerges as the key livelihood strategy for the disadvantaged class. The glam of remittance often hides the social cost that left-behind communities and often the migrants themselves have to pay. For example, dealing with illegal brokers, integration abroad and reintegration in own community after return, and dependency on social networks; all these can cause significant distress for the migrants and their families left-behind.

In this chapter, I introduced the base of my research by arguing that migrants from Bangladesh are predominantly the males and less-skilled ones. While professional or skilled migrants migrate for long-term settlements along with their families, unskilled migrants cannot bring their spouses in their destination countries. Hence, wives of a large numbers of male migrants stay behind. Given the practice of teen marriage widespread in the Bangladesh, the migrants often leave behind young wives who can be particularly vulnerable. There is a lack of study exploring these issues on left-behind women, in the context of Bangladesh.

I have also elaborated in this chapter, how gender plays crucial roles in the decision-making process of migration. Bangladesh’s government policy and social norms equally discourage female labour migration. Female labour migrants are stigmatized in the community, while men are provided with higher economic and social support for their migration.
Chapter 3: Literature Review

Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the contextual link between migration and Bangladesh. This chapter reviews the literature on local patriarchal context, and the existing literature on left-behind women. Therefore, the chapter is organized into two sections.

I begin the first section with a review on patriarchy. This leads to the literature on classic patriarchy which explains the theme of power relations between mothers and daughters in-law. Next three concepts under this section I discuss are: female autonomy, purdah and gender-based violence. In the second half of the chapter, I review the literature on left-behind wives. I begin with an explanation of the place (or lack of it) of left-behind in the migration literature. Then I move on to the literature on left behind women from other countries including the limited existing research on the left-behind women from Bangladesh. I also explore the literature on changing attitudes in gender norms due to men’s migration, and the literature that opposes representation of women as ‘left-behind’.

I claim that the understanding of the local patriarchal context in the milieu of men’s migration, is essential to recognize the reality that left-behind women face in Bangladesh. This framework facilitates the formulation of my research questions.

3.1. Reviewing Patriarchy

Several concepts are implemented in social studies to address the issue of gender inequality. Some of these concepts are noted as: patriarchy (Cain et al. 1979; Millett 1970; Eisenstein 1979), status of women (Dixon 2013), and female autonomy (Dyson and Moore 1983). Mason (1986, 287) argues, gender inequality is empirically as well as conceptually a multidimensional phenomenon. Societies in which women were powerless or of low status in one area did not necessarily show women to be powerless or of low status in other areas (Whyte 2015). It is crucial to recognize the differences in the meaning of the terms that explain gender inequality in different societies. For example, the system of patriarchy signposts different meaning in different societies. Scholars such as Hartman (1979) and Mies (2014) imply that patriarchy is maintained through women’s childbearing and rearing activities. However, Bangladeshi scholar Chowdhury (2009) argues, in Bangladesh, motherhood is not considered as opposed to women’s emancipation, rather motherhood gives women bargaining power with their husbands.
and families-in-law. It is observed that often, when children grow up, they support their mothers in bargaining with their fathers (Chowdhury 2009). Hartman (1981) indicated women marry for only economic reasons. This analysis ignores the sexual and emotional needs of women (Chowdhury 2009). In Bangladesh, girls enter into marriage so that they can fulfill their sexual and emotional needs legally; marriage is universal in Bangladesh and the main function of the family is to satisfy sexual and emotional needs of men and women (Chowdhury 2009).

Cain et al. (1979) define patriarchy in Bangladesh as:

A set of social relations with a material base that enables men to dominate women. Male dominance is supported by interlocking and reinforcing elements of kinship, political, and religious systems. Powerful norms of female seclusion extend to labour markets, severely limiting women’s opportunities for independent income generation.

Bangladeshi scholar Abeda Sultana (2011) defines patriarchy as the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general. It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power (Sultana 2011,3). However, other scholars such as Lerner (1989, 239) argue that even in patriarchal context women are not totally powerless or not totally deprived of rights, influence, and resources. Patterns of male dominance are likely to vary across societies according to economy, household and social structures.

While these views recognize patriarchy as family or community-based system where men control the labour of women and children in the family; capitalism, has also been defined as other side of patriarchy (Eisenstein 1979; Mies 2014). In the capitalist society, men’s superiority is maintained through job segregation by sex, as it enforces women’s lower wages in the labour market (Chowdhury 2009). Even when women from conservative societies such as Bangladesh enter into labour markets for an independent income, they achieve low payment and poor work environment with no job security. This is particularly true for garment factories in Bangladesh, where approximately 80 percent of garment workers are poor women working for Western clothing brands (The World Bank 2017). Mies (2014) believes that women are the optimal labour force for the capitalist system, because they are considered as housewives, not workers. Therefore, patriarchy, like other historical systems, differs historically, socially and geographically (Bardhan 1985; Caplan and Bujra, 1979; Mies 2014), and these differences
shape the exact nature of the vulnerabilities and well-being of women and girls in the system (Guha 2017).

Bangladesh is a patriarchal society in addition to being a class society; class formation governs the economic mobility of households, while patriarchy governs the economic mobility of women independent of class (Cain et al. 1979). Chowdhury (2009) argues in Bangladesh, men dominate, oppress and exploit women through private and public patriarchy. She argues, private patriarchy is maintained in the family through the misinterpretation of religion (Islam) and the non-recognition of unpaid work done by women at home. Bangladeshi patriarchal society teaches that Islam promises heaven for women in return for complete submission to their husbands; however, this statement is not found in the Quran, nor in the Words of the Prophet (Chowdhury 2009). While women are excluded from economic and political power through public patriarchy (Chowdhury 2009). She rightly argues, in the public arena women are only considered as sexual objects and patriarchy is maintained through sexual harassment.

Feminist economist Naila Kabeer (1997) states, patriarchal structures create gender-asymmetries in endowments, risks and constraints which penalize autonomous behaviour for women but also offer them provision and protection if they remain within its parameters. This is the basis of patriarchal bargain (Kabeer 1997). The term ‘patriarchal bargain’ is identified by Deniz Kandiyoti (1988). She explains, different forms of patriarchy present women with distinct ‘rules of the game’ and call for different strategies to maximize security and optimize life options with varying potential for active or passive resistance in the face of oppression (Kandiyoti 1988, 279). Often, it is easy to neglect women’s agency and highlight only their compliance with patriarchal restrictions. But women use varying strategies to cope with patriarchal arrangements in families and communities as they contest, negotiate, participate in and reproduce patriarchal relations (Shankar & Northcott 2009, 425; Gerami & Lehnerer 2001). For instance, Derne (1994) argues that women effectively use sex, docility and special treatment of their husbands to improve their situations. Even if such tactics help women achieve some goals, they also reproduce a narrow set of allowable gender roles (Chaudhuri et al. 2014).

As Sarah White (1992) insists that Bangladeshi village women themselves identified their own intertest with the advancement of the household as a whole. This thesis aims to explore the

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2 Gender Asymmetry is a term that says that masculine qualities tend to be more valued in our society than feminine qualities.
theme of women’s agency in the context of rural and suburban communities in Bangladesh, the rules of the game and their capacity to influence the patriarchal bargain.

Both Kandiyoti (1988) and Kabeer’s (1997) analysis of the ‘patriarchal bargain’ also suggest that women from varying class and ethnicity are exposed to different forms of patriarchy. The institution of polygamy can be an example of it. According to Kandiyoti (1988), one form of male dominance or patriarchy is the sub-Saharan African pattern, in which the insecurities of polygamy are matched by areas of relative autonomy that women clearly strive to maximize. Epstein (1982) explains Bangladeshi wives dread the possibility of their husband taking a second wife, but wives in Ivory Coast tolerate or even look forward to this prospect. Mason (1986) states, in the Bangladeshi context, polygamy often means that a husband transfers his affection and economic support from the old wife to the new. In the Ivory Coast, however, where women are largely self-supporting, the arrival of a second wife often permits a division of labour among wives that increases each woman’s ability to fulfil her economic and domestic goals (Mason 1986, 294). Sultan Ahmed and Bould (2004) mention that the Islamic constraints on multiple wives are simply not enforced in Bangladesh (Chowdhury 2001; Hashmi 2000; Kabeer 1988). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to address polygamy in Islam where several counter arguments exist. Amira Mashhour (2005) argues that polygamy was widely predominant in pre-Islamic society and restricting this traditional practice of marrying an unlimited number of wives to only four was itself a major step in limiting polygamy. While in some African and in Islamic countries Polygamy is still a practice, what is significant for this thesis is to recognize that in Bangladesh polygamy rarely exists.

Kandiyoti (1988) argues that the operations of the patrilocally-extended household are the main sources of classic patriarchy. The clearest example of classic patriarchy may be found in geographical area that includes North Africa, the Muslim Middle East, and South and East Asia (Chowdhury 2009; Kandiyoti 1988). Under this theory Bangladesh falls under classic patriarchy. Patriarchal extended family gives the senior man authority over everyone else, including younger men (Kandiyoti 1988). Now in the context of men migration, where both father and son can be abroad, how this power dynamics work in a classic patriarchal society like Bangladesh is yet to be discovered. Under classic patriarchy, young girls are given away in marriage into households headed by their husband’s father, where young brides are subordinate not only to all the men but also to the more senior women, especially their mother-in-law (Kandiyoti 1988, 278). In this thesis, I aim to analyse how young bride’s status changes in patrilocal extended family in the context of husband’s migration.
Kandiyoti (1988,) also differentiates the status of women under sub-Saharan Africa and women of regions that fall under classic patriarchy to indicate a more subordinated status of women who fall under the latter. She (285, 1988) states:

Unlike women in sub-Saharan Africa who attempt to resist unfavourable labour relations in the household, women in areas of classic patriarchy often adhere to rules that result in the unfailing devaluation of their labour. The cyclical fluctuations of women’s power position, combined with status considerations, result in their active collusion in the reproduction of their own subordination. They would rather adopt interpersonal strategies that maximize their security through manipulation of the affections of their sons and husband.

This view implies that women in classic patriarchal societies may have more vulnerable status in the family compared to women from relatively ‘not so classic patriarchal’ societies. On this note, I shift the focus on the literature on life-cycle of women under classic patriarchal societies and the relationship between mother and daughter in-laws.

**The mothers and daughters in law relationship: Tells of mistreatment, and transition of power over the life-cycle**

In Indian sub-continent, the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship is one which suffers from much trouble, fury and trauma. This tension between mother and daughter in-laws is often shown in Indian television, since art imitates real life. Ghafour (2014) states, soap operas centring this relationship are so popular that the genre got its own name, *saas-bahu* which translates as ‘mother-in-law, daughter-in-law’ in Hindi. The Indian-made *saas-bahu* soap operas have been exported to other South Asian countries since they attract large audiences there as well. This suggests the poisonous dynamic is not confined to just India, but also exists in countries such as Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh, where tensions in extended, intergenerational families sometimes end in violence (Ghafour 2014). Katy Gardner (2006) in her research on Bangladeshi migrants in Britain also notes, conflict between daughters and mothers-in-law play a pivotal role in many South Asian soap operas and films. The transition from daughter of the house to daughter-in-law in one’s husband’s house is popularly represented as painful and difficult period in South Asian culture (Gardner 2006).

Women’s status in the family and shifts in power over the life-cycle, have broadly covered in the literature on South and East Asian women studies (Das Gupta 1995; Mason 1986; Cain et al. 1979; Kandiyoti 1988; Chowdhury 2009). Cain et al. (1979) found in Bangladesh, the
hierarchy that exists between women of different status in the same household, stands for the social control of women and the perpetuation of patriarchy. In general, older women dominate younger women: mothers-in-law dominate daughters-in-law, elder brothers’ wives dominate younger brothers’ wives, and so on (Cain et al. 1979). In classic patriarchy, subordination to men is offset by the control older women attain over younger women (Kandiyoti 1988). This has been frequently noted, especially regard to Asian cultures, the position of the new bride in family politics tends to be quite different from the position of her mother-in-law, the new bride typically being powerless, while her mother-in-law exercises considerable domestic control over other women and children (Mason 1986). Thus, older women gain much status and autonomy in the household which only be achieved at the cost of marginalising the younger married women in the household (Das Gupta et al. 2003).

Similarly, this rise in women’s autonomy in old age depends on having the support of grown sons; without this, women can be vulnerable (Cain 1981; Rahman et al. 1992). This is a powerful force making for son preference, as well as to ensure that the sons are emotionally attached to the mother, becoming her firm supporters (Das Gupta et al. 2003). Indian mothers raise their boys with the notion that after marriage son can turn against mother by the influence of wife, hence, men have been raised to defend their mothers before they meet this future wife (Ghafour 2014). Das Gupta (1995) noted in North-west India:

The woman is careful to bind her sons to herself through various measures. She can be solicitous of their needs, the gentle nurturer who cooks foods they like. She can allow her sons to see how she suffers at the hands of her in-laws and even her husband. She can be careful to communicate that all her sacrifices will be rewarded if her sons have successful lives, while also subtly communicating that she expects unquestioning loyalty from them in compensation for her sacrifices.

Older women have a vested interest in the suppression of romantic love between youngsters to keep the conjugal bond secondary and to claim sons’ primary allegiance (Kandiyoti 1988).

It is often this circle of abuse for generations of women that women themselves continue to uphold. As Kandiyoti (1988, 287) states, ‘the cyclical nature of women’s power in the household and their anticipation of inheriting the authority of senior women encourages a thorough internalization of this form of patriarchy by the women themselves’. Sangari (2002) argues that the family is not only a place of women’s socialisation and oppression, but also a place of struggle and of the daily recreation of various types of inequality where women
participate. Maintaining patriarchy also involves the consent and participation of women (Sangari 2002). Similarly, Chowdhury (2009) argues, in Bangladesh, it is observed that women do not want patriarchal control for themselves, but they want patriarchal control for other women. Women oppress their daughters-in-law, but at the same time they want liberation for their own daughters (Chowdhury 2009).

Kandiyoti (1988) suggests, the breakdown of classic patriarchy results in emancipation of younger men from their fathers which can enable women escape the control of mother-in-law and head their own household. However, Cain et al. (1979) found in Bangladesh a trend of increasing poverty is linked to a trend of increasing household nuclearization, and women who are especially dependent on kinship bonds for their security stand to suffer the most from this trend. Amin’s (1997) research from Bangladesh also suggests, women in nuclear families appear to have a higher burden of domestic work than women in sub-nuclear or joint households. Women in joint families may have greater opportunities to share work with other adult women (Amin 1997). These are important facts to consider in the case of left behind wives. In absence of man due to his migration, wife’s’ vulnerability depends on whether she stays with her in-laws, her natal kin or by herself. Husband’s migration status (whether successful or not) and rural-urban context also play key role.

This above analysis shows that in Bangladesh, a woman’s lifecycle is much affected by the relationship with her mother-in-law. It remains to see how this power relation evolves in the absence of husbands and fathers-in-law (as father and son both can be labour migrants at the same time). I analyse the relationship between left-behind mothers and daughters-in-law in the light of my data, in chapter six.

3.1.1. Female Autonomy

Next concept that I focus on is female autonomy. Dyson and Moore (1983) describe it as the capacity to manipulate one’s personal environment. Autonomy indicates the ability: technical, social, and psychological to obtain information and to use it as the basis for making decisions about one’s private concerns and those of one’s intimates (Dyson and Moore 1983, 45). Hence, equality of autonomy between the sexes in the present sense implies equal decision-making ability with regard to personal affairs (Safilios-Rothschild 1982). Several scholars have focused on the measurement of autonomy for South Asian women (Morgan et al, 2002; Jejeebhoy and Sathar 2001; Jejeebhoy 2000; Mason et al. 1995). Morgan et al. (2002) consider three aspects
of wives’ power and autonomy: 1) their freedom of physical movement, that is, whether wives need permission before going to various places; 2) their say in economic decisions; and 3) the interpersonal control exercised by husbands, both psychological and physical. Jejeebhoy & Sathar (2001) and Cadwell et al. (1982) further explain it as:

- **decision making authority** the extent to which women have a say in family decisions and decisions concerning their own lives and well-being;
- **Physical autonomy** in interacting with the outside world, or the extent to which women are free of constraints on their physical mobility;
- **emotional autonomy** the extent to which women enjoy close bonds with spouses and are free from the threat of violence and abuse; and
- **economic and social autonomy** namely the extent to which women have access to and control over their own and their household’s economic resources.

Similar aspects have been considered to measure left-behind women’s autonomy in Southern Mozambique by scholars such as Yabiku, Agadjanian and Sevoyan (2010). However, the authors agreed due to their quantitative methods some aspects such as the effect of husband’s absence itself on wives’ autonomy, were not investigated properly. The qualitative approach (through semi-structured interviews and participant observation) allowed my research participants and myself too, to go beyond the questions asked and to conduct a detailed study on left-behind women in Bangladesh. My research questions related to left behind women’s freedom of movement and decision-making power and their relationship with in-laws, correlate with terms such as: **physical and emotional autonomy, social autonomy and decision-making authority** defined by Jejeebhoy & Sathar (2001) and Cadwell et al. (1982).

Jejeebhoy & Sathar (2001) state, although women are universally involved in unpaid household work, economic independence is usually measured in terms of wage-earning economic activity. They rightly argue, in India and Pakistan, however, where wage work for women is often unacceptable and poverty-induced, working for wages is not necessarily an indicator of autonomy. Wage-earning women are not likely to have made the decision to work on their own, nor do they always have control over their earnings (Jejeebhoy and Sathar 2001, 695). Yet, Cain et al. (1979) had mentioned, Indian women who participate in income-earning work seem to have more domestic autonomy than secluded Bangladeshi wives have.

Nevertheless, even in situations of dire need, families in cultures in which women are secluded may be reluctant to allow women to work for wages outside the family farm or business (Jejeebhoy & Sathar 2001). Similar to some parts of India such as Punjab and Uttar Pradesh
(Jejeebhoy & Sathar 2001), rural women in Bangladesh can also be seen occupied in tending animals and working on family farms. Although, Anderson & Eswaran’s (2007) empirical research reveals that employment on their husbands’ farms gave Bangladeshi women no more autonomy than doing housework. A woman’s housework is deemed a household public service; her work on the farm, is deemed to be of no additional worth despite the fact that it generates income (Anderson and Eswaran 2007, 189).

In patriarchal context, tight controls are exerted on women in every sphere of their lives: their free movement, their voice in family affairs, their economic independence and their relations with their husbands (Jejeebhoy and Sathar 2001). Cain et al. (1979) had argued, the systemic nature of patriarchy suggests that solution to the problem of women’s vulnerability and lack of income-earning opportunity will not be easily reached. They have also argued, to the extent that policies seeking to increase women’s economic autonomy or protect their rights conflict with patriarchal interest, such policies will meet resistance. I found similar attitudes in village context of Bogura district. My interview with a female NGO worker reveals, village women hand over the money to their husbands that women receive from micro credit or loans provided by BRAC\(^3\). Even though these programs’ primary motive is to empower women by providing them loans/money, in reality, that money goes to their husbands. The female NGO worker herself mentions women have no authority over the money they receive. They give it to their husbands who decide whether to spend it on agricultural work or to use it for migration expenses.

Thus, policies to increase women’s autonomy do not always match the local reality for women in conservative societies. For example, in Bangladesh, aspects of membership in saving and credit groups have initially linked to a reduction in the risks of domestic violence due to the enhanced status of a woman in her family as a result of her ability to bring in a valued resource, such as a loan (Hashemi et al. 1996; Kabeer 2001; Schuler et al. 1996). However, other in-depth studies from Bangladesh have suggested much more ambiguity concerning the protective effects of membership in savings and credit groups on the risks of violence (Koenig et al. 2003). Aminur Rahman (1999) reported that 70% of the women members of savings and credit groups in his study indicated that levels of violence had actually increased since they became members. Some of the factors behind increased violence are: an emphasis on timely repayment through

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\(^3\) BRAC is an international development organisation based in Bangladesh. BRAC is present in all 64 districts of Bangladesh as well as 13 other countries in Asia, Africa, and the Americas.
group social collateral, which forces women to obtain back instalment payments from their husbands; the failure of wives to secure new loans; the disruption of wives’ domestic responsibilities to attend group meetings and tension resulting from the increased earning power of the wife (Rahman 1999). This suggests in rural Bangladesh, wives’ income generating roles can invite tension in their conjugal life. It remains to see if these attitudes change in the context of men’s migration.

Cain et al. (1979) suggested, resistance can be expected from women as well as men, if policy initiatives imply violating the norms of Purdah and thus threaten and vital component of women’s social status. Here, at this point I shift the focus on the literature on Purdah, a practice that controls many of South Asian including Bangladeshi women’s physical, social and economic autonomy.

### 3.1.2. Purdah

In a traditional Islamic society such as rural Bangladesh, a woman’s prestige is derived from the extent to which she abides by the norms of purdah (Simmons et al. 1992). Abdullah and Zeidenstein (1982) characterize the Purdah system as:

The strict practice of purdah is a social and religious ideal in rural Bangladesh. Strict practice means that a woman stays within the family compound or bari, which is usually surrounded by a wall of vegetation and sometimes has screens of woven rushes to protect the inner courtyard. If possible, she stays within the inner courtyard. She is never seen by any but close family males. If a woman in strict purdah must go out to visit her parents once or twice a year or for an emergency, she will wear a burkah, a loose garment that covers her from crown to toe.

Purdah, in other words, is a system of excluding women and enforcing high standards of female modesty (Papanek 1973). Women who move out of the homestead (bari) into the public ‘male space’ are considered both provocative and offensive (Abdullah & Zeidenstein 1982). Simmons et al. (1992) conducted research on community perception of women working in family planning organization in Bangladesh. Findings suggest villagers initially mention about female family planning official and her family as ‘that bari /house has no fence, so it has allowed the bride to roam around the village like a shameless bitch’ (Simmons et al. 1992, 100). The notion is women’s sexual impulses are not to be trusted, therefore they must be physically segregated from men (Papanek 1973; Simmons et al. 1992). Women who break
gender norms are ridiculed not so much because they harm themselves, but because the loss of
their prestige undermines the very foundations of society (Simmons et al. 1992).

Pastner (1974) using example from Pakistan mentioned, male honour is dependent on the
unsullied honour of women, hence, purdah is one way of preserving the honour of men.
Cultural practices, such as dress standards, restrictions on the educational and physical mobility
of women, or arranged marriages, serve as additional means of preserving honour and are
examined as structural factors conditioning the behaviour of women (Pastner 1974) However,
Cain et al. (1979) mentioned in the context of Bangladesh, Purdah is a complex institution that
entails much more than restrictions on women’s physical mobility and dress. They argued,
purdah denies women access to many opportunities and aspects of everyday life and at the
same time confers upon them social status as a protected group. Thus, in theory, Purdah both
controls women and provides them with shelter and security (Cain et al. 1979).

This view can imply that purdah is a barrier to female autonomy, since women have to
compromise their freedom of mobility for the sake of food and security by adopting purdah. Hence, whether the practice of purdah enhances or detracts from women’s status has been
much debated (Mason 1986). Many scholars have argued that seclusion lowers women’s status
by depriving them of opportunities to engage in income-generating activities (Youssef 1982;
Cain et al. 1979). On the other hand, scholars such as Dixon (2013), Epstein (1982), Safilios-
Rothschild (1980) have disagreed. Feldman and McCarthy (1983) have argued for rural women
in Bangladesh, Burkha (long garments covering head to toe) the concrete version of Purdah,
increases the mobility of Muslim women, thereby enhancing their social participation and
visibility and maintaining rather than diminishing women’s status.

Possibly, a well-explained analysis on this debate is provided by Mason (1986):

When women in Muslim societies are compared with women in
Western European or North American societies, the conclusion often is that Purdah
deprives women of autonomy. On the other hand, when these same women are
compared with women in highly patriarchal non-Muslim societies, the conclusion often
is the reverse: Purdah does not deprive women of autonomy any more than a number
of other patriarchal institutions do and may even provide women with security or
prestige.
This is also supported by Jejeebhoy and Sathar’s (2001) research on parts of both India (Hindu majority) and Pakistan (Muslim majority). They concluded, there is far less support for the commonly held assumption that Muslim women have less autonomy than Hindu women.

However, Koenig et al. (2003) conducted a quantitative research in two districts of Bangladesh, which suggests dissimilar findings on the basis of religion. It suggests, the district Jessore being close to Indian boarder, has more Hindu population and higher rate of education among women compared to northern district Sirajganj. The Sirajganj area is also characterised by more rigid adherence to the norms of Purdah for women and, as a result, greater physical and social isolation among women (Koenig et al. 2003). Women in Sirajganj are also subject to somewhat lower levels of mobility outside their villages and more restricted contact with men than are women in Jessore. Here, it is worth noting that my study villages for this thesis are under Bogura district, Bogura district is also in Northern Bangladesh, one hour away by car/bus from Sirajganj. Rural areas of both Bogura and Sirajganj tend to follow strict ‘Islamic values’, even though both the districts have minor Hindu population.

The above analysis of the literature on purdah suggests, it’s impact on women’s autonomy varies geographically wise. Mason (1986) rightly argues, depending on the point of comparison chosen, a given measure of female status can lead to different conclusions. Whether purdah increases or decreases female autonomy, I would argue the answer is context specific. In Bangladesh Muslim women’s purdah is also related to class. This is discussed next.

**Class and Purdah in Bangladesh:**

Purdah in Bangladesh is best expressed by Nazmul Karim (1963), who notes that seclusion was expected of women of good social status, they accepted their seclusion for the sake of their own prestige and for the maintenance of social distance. Amin (1997) states, female seclusion is an important symbolic expression of status differentiation within a society. The decision to allow women to work outside their home is resisted by families because it can be interpreted as downward economic mobility (Amin 1997). Hence, very few women work outside the home, even when they are in dire need of money. The norms of purdah influence the distance a woman would be willing to travel to work, the distance a husband would permit his wife to travel, a woman’s willingness to work for a stranger, and the receptivity of potential employers (Cain et al. 1979). Although, for most married Muslim women in rural villages, working outside of home is not even an option, even in present day context.
For most of rural Bangladesh and also for conservative urbans, the capability to keep one’s women in purdah depends on the general position of the family. For women to work outside of home is a violation of purdah and at the same time an overt sign of poverty, since only the poorest families cannot afford to keep their women in purdah (Amin 1997). As Feldman and McCarthy’s (1983, 953) research on Bangladesh suggests:

Richer Muslim families obviously were able to afford the costs generated by the strict seclusion of their women because they could retain widows or women of poor families to do the work that involved breaking norms of purdah. Poor or widowed women, who were sometimes female relatives, were given tasks such as washing clothes in the pond, bringing water, taking food to labourers in the field (if necessary), gathering wood, and doing other arduous tasks—such as rice husking—not done by high status women.

Even in such context, for poor and widowed women, efforts were made to observe purdah. For example, the routine of the day was organized in such a way that women’s work in the ponds or bathing was done during the time when most men were in the fields (Feldman & McCarthy 1983). With the return of the men, women retired to the confines of the household compound, where the observance of Purdah depended on the status and age of the women involved (Feldman & McCarthy 1983).

Thus, purdah plays a key role in controlling women’s physical mobility and hence, in women’s autonomy in Bangladesh. It’s intersection with class and religion results in varying forms of practice. A wealthy Muslim woman in Bangladesh preserves her seclusion by moving around in a car and avoiding public transport, she can decide not to wear Burkha or hijab (Amin 1997). A poor woman who cannot afford stylish satin Burkha maintains her modesty with a thin cotton sari, one end of which is draped around her head (Amin 1997). I discuss practice of Burkha and current situation of women in Bangladesh further, in chapter three on Islam and Bangladesh. In this thesis I aim to analyse how the practice of purdah impacts women’s status in Bangladesh, in the context of men’s migration.

3.1.3. Vulnerability to Gender-based Violence

The final concept I focus in this section of literature review, is gender-based violence. While men also experience abuse, women almost always experience higher rate of gender specific violence. Patriarchal structure that legitimizes violence, legal authorities fail to protect women,
economic structures subordinate women, and political systems marginalize women’s needs; all these have contributed to preserve gender-based violence (Hadi 2000; Heisi et al. 1994). Gender-based violence can be understood as any act of verbal or physical force, coercion or life-threatening deprivation, directed at an individual woman or girl that cause physical or psychological harm, humiliation or arbitrary deprivation of liberty that perpetuates female subordination (Heise et al. 1994). This definition explains gender-based violence as physical, psychological, economical and sexual abuse against women. Frequently, violence against women are committed by intimate partner.

Marital violence is common and inherent to the marital relationship in all societies (Counts 1990; Finklar 1997; Gelles 1980). While discussing the theoretical and historical perspectives of marital violence, Levinson (1989) pointed out that in sexual dialogue, the woman’s position was weakened because of her economic dependence, lesser physical strength, legal and social subordination to her husband, and her obligation to fulfil the physical demands of her husband. Nearly similar views are expressed by others where rigid roles, masculinity, toughness, and male honour are found to be linked with marital violence (Counts 1999). Hadi’s (2000) research on Bangladesh suggests, marital violence is linked to a) the patriarchal family structure in which gender violence is accepted or naturalized, b) the rigid family system in which interactions between family members are limited and c) the lack of autonomy or freedom for women.

Wife beating is a common form of marital violence possibly in all culture, and Bangladesh appears as no exception. Qualitative data from rural Bangladesh describes a range of situation: from failure to perform domestic chores adequately, to insubordination to the husband or members of the extended family, to inappropriate interactions with male outsiders and concerns over fidelity-in which physical beating of the wife by the husband is considered an appropriate and justifiable response (Abdullah and Zeidenstein 1982; Hartmann and Boyce 1983; Schuler et al. 1996, 1998). The VAW (Violence against women) Survey 2015 conducted by BBS (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics), revealed that 73% of ever married women in Bangladesh have experienced any kind of violence by their current husband (Ministry of Planning Bangladesh 2015).

Given this scenario of abuse by the hand of husbands, left behind wives may suffer less abuse when their husbands are absence due to migration. However, in Bangladesh women can be abused by other male family members such as: brothers, male in-laws, even adult sons (Hadi
In Bangladesh, family is the breeding ground for some of the most persistent kinds of discrimination against women (Jahan 1994). Young left-behind wives can be extremely vulnerable if they do not feel safe at in-law’s house. Local men can exploit husbands’ absences to sexually harass left behind wives. In rural Bangladesh, impoverished women merely suspected of affairs can suffer physical violence sanctioned by **sharia law** (Ahmed & Basu 2011). Most of the time in such cases, men wrongfully blame women to escape rape charges.

Migrant man can suspect wife’s loyalty if there’s a communication gap which can lead to mental dispute between them. Study on Mexican migrant men in the US has shown, anxiety symptoms attributable to marital and parental ambivalence can be exacerbated when men are unable to call wives in Mexico frequently (Grzywacz et al. 2006). Teen daughters of migrant fathers can also be exposed to gender-based violence especially when the male guardian is absence and ‘eve teasing’ a widespread practice in the community. ‘Eve-teasing’, originally an Indian-English term. The term is widely used in South Asia to describe the public bullying of girls and women by boys and men, where boys intercept girls on public transport, the street and at workplaces and shout obscenities at them, laugh at them, force them to talk, verbally abuse them, threaten them with abduction, and even touch them inappropriately (Gangoli 2001). In fact, ‘eve teasing’ of girls walking to school or using public transport is considered to be one of the major causes of dropout from school and early marriage for girls in Bangladesh (Nahar et al. 2013). Young women from the migrant family can particularly be targeted, if the perpetrators are aware of male guardian’s absence. The documentation on the prevalence of violence against women in the migrant families in Bangladesh has remained poor. I aim to address this gap in this thesis.

In this segment of the chapter, I have focused on the key concepts that provide an understanding of the systematic gender inequality in Bangladesh. Discussion of this topic includes contributions from both international and Bangladeshi authors. To ensure that the search encompassed an analysis of Bengali journal articles on these issues, I contacted professor Manosh Chowdhury of the Department of Anthropology at JahangirNarag University Bangladesh, who very kindly provided me with some articles he had in possession from the journal *Somajnirikkhon*. Although useful, the articles dated back to the 1990s and mainly focused on female sexuality, and less on patriarchy, *purdah* and left-behind women. It was not feasible to cite contemporary Bengali literature (which are not accessible online) that challenges women’s agency under patriarchy.
I now shift the focus to the literature of left-behind women. Very little research has been done in Bangladesh on the left-behind women. Therefore, I begin the next segment by looking at studies conducted in other parts of the world, while bringing in existing research on left-behind women from Bangladesh. I begin by analysing the positions of left-behind in the migration literature.

3.2. The Place (or lack of it) of Left Behind in the Migration Literature

Widening gap between developed and developing countries, rapidly increasing populations, interference by developed nations into developing countries, the disruption caused by economic development and the progress in transport and communication system; all create the structural conditions that may encourage an individual to consider life elsewhere (Kumari 2007). The revolution of information and communication technology coupled with enlarged labour demand in the developed countries has meant that many people are able to live transnationally (Gartaula et al. 2012; Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007). Transnational lives can be understood as ‘maintaining significant social, economic and cultural ties with countries of origin and with fellow migrants elsewhere’ (Grillo and Mazzucato 2008, 176). In most cases, there is an increased migration of male members from developing countries to developed countries (Kaur 2015). Silvia Pedraza (1991) claims, flows of migration that are dominated by men require that we consider the woman’s side, when the women themselves are left behind in the communities.

Since family members rarely migrate together, migration has usually involved the separation, though not always the fragmentation, of families (Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007). Most migration scholars, policy-makers and public media have focused on migrants, their journey and arrivals; while little research has done on their areas of origin, departure, separation and leaving family members, familiar places behind (Toyota et al. 2007; Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007; Datta and Mishra 2011; Gartaula et al. 2012). The people left behind are often invisible, and their role, experience, wellbeing and interconnectedness with the practice of migration are not well understood (Hadi 1999; Nguyen et al. 2006).

Fass (2005) notes, globalization has not only made migration more possible, but has affected the family decisions that frame migration. Menjivar and Agadjanian (2007) argue, our understanding of globalization and its effects on local lives is considerably enhanced when we look at how migration affects not only those family members who migrate, but also those who
stay. Most literature focuses on the migrants, but it is as important to include the experience of those left behind, particularly the women because migration is not an individual decision, but it involves the whole family, albeit in diverse ways (De Haas 2005; Velayutham and Wise 2005; Yeoh et al. 2005). Furthermore, migration is a cultural matter, as it forms part and parcel of people’s lives aiming to improve their living standard (Gartaula 2009; Rigg 2007; Kaur 2015).

Nevertheless, scholars have recently started to explore the dynamics of the people left behind within the framework of ‘migration-left-behind nexus’ (Jones and Kittisuksathit 2003; Rigg 2007; Toyota et al. 2007; Biao 2007). It is also considered significant to focus not just on the transnational processes at the level of organisations, enterprises and communities, but also on the social practices of transnationalism as they affect the family or the household across the two spaces of origin and destination (Grillo and Mazzucato 2008; Yeoh et al. 2005). Such social practices of transnationalism due to migration of a family member, have not detailed in the literature on migration, particularly on Bangladesh.

The most significant migration literature that links migration and the left behind, is the household strategy theory (Stark and Bloom 1985). The theory contends that migration is primarily a household strategy aimed at diversifying income sources, thereby reducing economic risks and maximising economic welfare at the household level (Toyota et al. 2007). However, such literature has mainly focused on decision-making mechanism prior to migration (e.g. Chant 1998; Willis and Yeoh 2000), and sheds less light on the consequences of migration and the impact on the left behind (Toyota et al. 2007). Sen and Clapp (2000) mention, women are largely ‘unfree’ and have only limited power to influence decisions on issues such as the migration of their husbands, let alone their own migration. This exemplifies the limitations of household approaches, which tend to obscure such intra-household gender inequalities (De Haas and Van Rooij 2010).

Yet, Brettell and Hollifield (2000) state, the household approach to migration, which theorizes that migration decisions are made within a group of social actors and under the influence of various economic, political, social and cultural relationships and considerations; provides a more detailed analysis of why some people move while others do not. While this approach is fruitful for interpreting class or regional divergences in migration patterns, it has yet to be fully utilized to understand gendered migration and, in particular, the circumstances that lead spouses to separate and (often) women to stay (Archambault 2010). Similarly, more literature
on migration (e.g. Skeldon 1997; Adams and Page 2005) emphasizes on whether migration decreases poverty and experiences of left-behind is often ignored. Hence, Van Hear (2000) argues, migration studies need to investigate not only livelihood strategies and development prospects of those left behind, but also emphasise their relationship with people who leave.

It is important to recognize that familial and social ties between migrants and the left beinds, differ across countries and cultures. For example, in a community of acute poverty, a member’s out migration means one less mouth to feed and would thus almost certainly increase the welfare of the left behind (Rigg 2007). Whereas, for communities in the Western world with relatively developed infrastructure, the departures of members are largely perceived to be detrimental to community development (Toyota et al. 2007). Out-migration can also mean different things for the same community at different times (Toyota et al. 2007).

The impact of migration on the source communities and those left behind is an evolving process rather than something which can be regarded as predictable and fixed (Rigg 2007; Toyota et al. 2007). Biao (2007) reports that being physically left-behind by migrants, the rural communities in China have also been left behind economically and socially. He reports not only the connection between the two places of origin and destination, but also the (lack of) wellbeing of the people left behind. Whereas Hadi’s (1999) research indicates, labour migrants interact with their family members back home in many ways that help modify the traditional values of the left behind which also influence their wellbeing. Hence, it is essential to understand that the impact of out migration on the left behind is time and context specific.

Toyota et al. (2007) recommend taking into full account the constant, dynamic interplay between migration and the left behind when assessing the impact of migration. They claim, it would be misleading to assume that the left behind community would always hold on to ‘traditional values’ or remain static in their world views. Yet, in traditional conservative societies like rural Bangladesh, the impact of male migration can be limited. Hadi’s (2001, 53) claim, ‘migration of men to North brings secular values in the life of left behind in Bangladesh’, may not always be applicable to most rural villages. As majority of the circular migration, or low-skilled labourers migrate to Middle-East and East Asian countries and not to North or Western countries (Siddiqui 2003, 1; Kibria 2011, 2; Etzold and Mallick 2015, 2). Some countries in the Middle East may already have more conservative norms than rural Bangladeshi societies.
On the research on ‘Migration-Left Behind Nexus’ Toyota et al. (2007) claim, it is common in parts of Pacific Asia for household members to rotate who migrates; thus, once-migrants may become part of left behind, while the left behind may become migrants in time. Nevertheless, as discussed in chapter one, due to the stigmatization of female labour migration and traditional values, female labour migration is not encouraged from Bangladesh. Muslim women’s labour migration is severely restricted due to social values and official policies (for example, in Sudan and Bangladesh) (Abusharaf 1997; Belanger and Rahman 2013).

There is a research gap on the impact of male migration on women, who themselves have not moved but live in village-based families where the male members have left for work in other countries. Hugo (2000) contends that families of migrants left behind have to deal with not only the absence of their men, but also the influences of newly acquired money, goods, ideas, attitudes, behaviours and innovations transmitted back to them by the migrants. On the other hand, family members of new and unsuccessful migrants may face different challenges. Next, I focus on the existing literature on left-behind wives.

3.2.1. Women Who Do Not Migrate

The limited research conducted on the left-behind women across nations and eras, has provided contrasting results. Some studies emphasise on the positive effect of migration, claiming that women undertake more authorities and decision making in their families when their husbands migrate. Others report that such new roles generate tension and anxiety among the left behind women.

**Wellbeing and Everyday Life**

Hoodfar (1996) found, for Egyptian left behind wives, male migration is not easy, and migration is viewed as a period of hardship. Often, women’s apprehensions about male migration are related to the fear of divorce and desertion in eastern India (Menon, 1995).

Hondagneu-Sotelo (1992) found that many of the Mexican women were opposed to their husbands’ migration, primarily because of the fear of abandoned by them. Chee (2003) concluded in her study that marital relations between couples were disturbed for separation by distance. Thomas et al. (2003) stated that in the UK, China and India, the majority of wives reported that the absence of their spouses had led to various problems, including loneliness, emotional disturbance and lack of guidance for children. Kaur (2015) found in Punjab, India
that young left behind wives (below 35 ages) have more symptoms of emotional sickness, loneliness and depression than elder left behind wives. The reason of emotional sickness among young women were the long-distance relationship with husband and less time passed together due to his migration (Kaur 2015).

Consequently, while some couples experienced conflict and emotional distance, divorce, and extramarital affairs, others in fact, developed stronger emotional ties during separation (Farooq and Javed 2009). In a study of conjugal relations between Ecuadorian transnational migrants in New York and their wives in the highlands of Ecuador, Pribilsky (2004) found Ecuadorian women’s lives had improved because they had assumed new roles and status. Men’s and women’s conjugal relationships also improved after migration through negotiations to maintain their relationships in spite of distance (Pribilsky 2004).

Mexican left behind women in Hondagneu-Sotelo’s (1992) study shared their frustration when they were faced with the duty of providing for their families and also caring for them. Thus, husband’s migration put extra burden on them. However, in traditional societies where women are not allowed to work outside of home, their dependency on family members can increase in absence of main providers/husbands. Gulati (1993) finds in the Kerala state of India, left behind women need considerable support from family members, friends and neighbours; wives’ dependency on the network increases during migrant husbands’ absence. Gulati (1993) concludes, if women were properly empowered in education, health care, work participation and sharing of responsibilities, they would be more than capable of dealing with tasks from which they were traditionally excluded by men. However, as Hondagneu-Sotelo’s (1992) research suggest, even in communities where women are able to take-up income generating works, such responsibilities may prove to be additional burden on top of housekeeping and caring roles. Gartaula et al. (2012) found in Nepal, left behind women who lives separately from in-laws have more responsibility in household management and face an additional workload in the absence of their husbands. While women living with in-laws can share their work with other household members and the households are managed by their parents-in-law (Gartaula et al. 2012). Such everyday life experience of left behind wives in Bangladesh is yet to be explored.

**Women’s Work Participation**

Global evidence shows women often assume new roles and responsibilities in their husbands’ absence (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; UN 2004; Datta and Mishra 2011). These may include
household or income-generating activities. But studies differ on whether women’s new roles challenge the gendered division of labor (Radel and Schmook 2009) or entrench men’s positions as primary breadwinners (Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007; Lokshin and Glinskaya, 2008).

In most cases, the main purpose of migration is to find employment and better income in order to improve life standard. Often, male migration leads to a rise in household income, and improved standard of living (Datta and Mishra 2011). In a study of a Catholic upper caste village of peasant origin in Goa state India, Mascarenhas-Keyes (1990) found that male migration led to the withdrawal of women from agricultural work. In the case of Nepal, while using data from the Nepalese household survey, Lokshin and Glinskaya (2008) found that male migration for work has a negative impact on the level of participation in market work by the women left behind.

Simultaneously, studies also report that the remittances sent by the migrant husbands are often not adequate. In a study of poor peasants and landless families in rural Uttar Pradesh in Northern India, Jetley (1987) finds that the additional income through remittances does not substantially change the economic status of the family, nor does it help the latter rise above the subsistence level. Instead, women left behind have to assume, in addition to familial and domestic responsibilities, the role of a breadwinner (Jetley 1987); similar to Hondagneu-Sotelo’s (1992)’s study with Mexican left-behind wives. Geeta Menon (1995) finds in Orissa state of India that income from migration does not mitigate poverty, nor does it make amends for the problems women face in the absence of men. In Mexico, Aysa and Massey (2004) conclude that women could be pushed into labour force after their husbands’ migration and perhaps acquire greater bargaining power as a result. But this transformation is likely to take place only in urban areas, where employment opportunities for women were more plentiful than in the countryside (Aysa and Massey 2004).

In a study of male outmigration from rice-producing regions of eastern Indian state Uttar Pradesh, Paris et al. (2005) find that there has been a marked increase in women’s agricultural work, including a wide range of farm tasks and a heavier workload, and consequently the women have less time for domestic tasks and childcare. However, in communities where women are already engaged in agricultural work, men’s migration does not put extra pressure on left-behind women. For example, Archambault (2010) finds in Tanzania that women and children were involved in almost all the farm work, which included the planting, pruning, and
picking of a number of different crops. Having men, as opposed to women, leave the highlands in search of work also seemed to be less disruptive to rural agricultural production (Archambault 2010). Women in this study emphasized the cultural importance of maintaining own farm and they were comfortable that they did not have to migrate instead of the men. As Bangladesh is a traditional Muslim society, women’s participation in economic activities and in agriculture has remained low (Jaim and Hossain 2011). Female participation is limited to mostly livestock and poultry farming which are marginal economic activities (Jaim and Hossain 2011). What challenges left behind Bangladeshi women face who are not traditionally engaged in labour participation, has not explored in the migration literature yet.

Sociocultural norms like purdah, generally restrict Bangladeshi women’s participation in labour force, even in the absence of their husbands (Mallick & Rafi 2010; Schoen 2015). Their employment is limited to household-based production, which reinforces the female role as domestic caretaker (Habib, 2010). Men perceive female entrance into other labour as a threat to their dominance in households, but also their social honor and prestige (Banks, 2013). The richer or more educated the men, the more unseemly their wives’ employment (Rahman & Islam, 2013). Therefore, one may expect wives of successful male migrants to participate less in the labour force. Whether these conventional norms related to women’s labour force participation change in the context of men’s migration, require further research.

**Decision-making Power and Physical Mobility**

As discussed above left behind women living in nuclear families experience men’s migration differently from their counterparts who live in joint families. In India, left behind women who stay separately from in-laws, experience both higher levels of autonomy and greater responsibility (Desai and Banerji 2008). Similarly, In Nepal, women living as de-facto heads of households have more decision-making power than women living with in-laws (Gartaula et al. 2012). Specific to nuclear households, Paris et al. (1995) find in India that due to the absence of males, women have to perform tasks traditionally done by men (e.g. land preparation) and this participation increased women’s decision-making power. Mascarenhas-Keyes (1990) found in Goa state of India, the absence of men for prolong period made their wives the principle decision makers of the households. The women have, in fact, become self-reliant, and manage both the households as well as remittances, besides supervising farms and households (Mascarenhas-Keyes 1990).
To the contrary, Menjivar and Agadjanian (2007) argue, although women do fulfill some additional tasks when their husbands leave, neither the nature nor the scope of these tasks challenge the deeply entrenched gender inequality. Jetley (1987) argues though women in migrants’ families may be taking decisions regarding the daily subsistence of the family, major decisions such as those pertaining to purchase and sale of land, and expenditure on ceremonies, among other things, are made by the men, when they visit home. De Haas and Van Rooij (2010) find in rural Morocco, more decision-making authority among left behind women in nuclear families, however this gain in authority is mainly temporary. De Haas and Van Rooij (2010, 57) state:

Migrants take over their positions as ‘patriarchs’ as soon as they return. It is particularly striking that the vast majority of women saw this (temporary) increase in responsibilities and decision-making power as a burden. They typically stated that it is ‘not the right position’ for a woman, often because they were afraid that they would be criticized by community members for their ‘manly’ behavior. The respondents considered prevailing role patterns as ‘natural’, and most said that they were not prepared to bear the responsibility for decision-making and play the role of household head.

Thus, the division of labour established through the husbands’ migration further reinforces gender inequality (Datta and Mishra 2011; Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007).

Gulati (1993) found in Kerala state of India that the migration of men breaks down women’s isolation, increases mobility and brings them into contact with a wider network of institutions. However, in traditional societies, the close family networks can put restrictions on women’s movement. Undoubtedly, increased labour participation of left-behind women in agriculture or other income generating activities can increase their physical mobility in most societies. There is limited literature on mobility of left-behind women, partly because issues related to women’s physical mobility are often specific to conservative societies, such as rural Bangladesh. Yet, women in such context may prefer their limited physical mobility over the imposed bread earner roles.

The construction of masculinity in Bangladesh would seem to limit gains in mobility or decision-making power for left-behind women. Women’s independent movement suggests moral looseness; hence, men uphold their social standing by restricting wives’ mobility (Schoen 2015). Women have little control over household decisions, particularly income
allocation, because only ‘real men’ are thought to manage family resources (Imtiaz 2013). Since married Bangladeshi women typically live with in-laws, migrant husbands could maintain these controls through family members.

However, the limited empirical evidence (mostly quantitative) that is available on Bangladeshi left-behind wives, contradicts such views. Left behind wives in Bangladesh participate more in social functions (Kumari 2007), have greater freedom to visit acquaintances (Sarker and Islam 2014), and control remittance spending (Rahman 2007). Yet, none of the studies have provided a detailed picture on how these positive changes have occurred in the context of classic patriarchal system. Everyday life experience of left behind wives (e.g. relationship with in-laws and migrant husbands) are not also detailed. Hence, a closer examination of left-behind women’s family relations, is required to better understand the impact of men’s migration on women in Bangladesh.

Baden et al. (1994) find in Bangladesh, in-laws are known to police wives’ behavior. In such scenarios, the decentralization of husband’s authority to members with different interests and values may result in imperfect enforcement of gender norms. Migrant husbands may also endorse greater decision-making power for wives to protect their interests from family members. These inter-household dynamics need to be studied in detail and linked to changes in women’s circumstances. Changes in gender norms due to men’s migration is discussed next.

### 3.2.2. Transfer of Gender Norms in the Milieu of Men’s Migration

Social institutions and norms frame the gender roles at the roots of a society and the distribution of power between men and women in the household and in the economic and political landscapes (Alesina et al. 2013; Meyersson 2014). The relevance of international migration goes well beyond the movement of people as migration also represent a powerful mechanism to transmit ideas across borders (Beine et al. 2013; Levitt 1998). The role of migration as agent of transformative social change, challenging discriminatory social norms, and gender roles has been neglected (Ferrant and Tuccio 2015). Much less attention has been given to the relationship between migration and gender inequality in origin countries (Tuccio and Wahba 2018).

Gender ideologies may be reconfigured across transnational spaces, as people exercise agency with new information and experience (Mahler and Pessar 2001). When migrants visit or return to their origin countries, they bring back the newly acquired norms and those may spread
around their communities (Datta and Mishra 2011; Tuccio and Wahba 2018; Boyd 1989). Exposer to different practices and attitudes towards women within a country: such as exposure to female leaders has been seen as an important channel through which gender norms are shaped (Beaman et al. 2009). However, Ferrant and Tuccio (2015) rightly argue, migration may be a channel of norms transmission challenging discrimination against women in social institution at home when it is toward countries having low levels of discrimination. It can also reinforce them when it is toward countries with high levels of discrimination (Ferrant and Tuccio 2015).

Tuccio and Wahba’s (2018) research on Jordan shows that return migrants transfer conservative norms from destination countries with highly traditional gender roles, which widen already existent gender gaps in Jordan. Their findings further suggest, women with a returnee family member from more conservative Arab countries, are more likely to bear traditional gender norms than women in households with no migration experience. Bertoli and Marchetta (2015) demonstrate that Egyptian married couples where the husband has a past migration experience in another Arab country have a significantly larger number of children than stayers. Fargues’ (2006) analysis shows that fertility rates in sending countries are affected by the rates prevailing in their migrants’ host countries, with rates declining in case of migrants sent to low fertility destinations and increasing in case of migrants sent to high fertility ones.

Hondagneu-Sotelo (1992) argues that the migration process reconstructs patriarchy. While patriarchal gender relations are instrumental in organizing (family stage) migration, lengthy spousal separations alter patterns of patriarchal authority and the traditional gendered household division of labor (Datta and Mishra 2011). Hondagneu-Sotelo (1992) finds that long-term migrants, who had stayed in the US in ‘bachelor communities’, learnt cooking, cleaning and other domestic chores. When they were reunited with their families, they continued these activities, and such households had a more non-traditional division of labour. On the other hand, Jetley (1987) finds that when male migrants return home for a fortnight or a month every year, in rural Uttar Pradesh, India, they seldom help in household chores, though they are used to cooking, cleaning and washing in the city.

Other studies state that whereas there are transformations in gender roles as a result of men’s migration, these are neither simple nor unidirectional (Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007). In her study of a Yucatec Maya community in Mexico, Bever (2002) observed that despite obvious transformations in gender roles, gender ideology continued to be strongly defended by both
men and women. In a study of migrants in Turkey, Erman (2001) noted that patriarchy reproduces itself in the lives of migrants. In Mexico, De Snyder (1993) argued that newly acquired responsibilities and obligations that women are forced to assume as a result of their husband’s migration could empower women but could also subject them to considerable stress because these role expansions clash sharply with traditional expectations of gender roles and therefore produce family and social conflict. Hence, scholars (e.g. De Snyder 1993; Aysa and Massey 2004) call for the need to contextualize women’s experiences within the sociocultural milieu where migration-induced changes in responsibilities, power, and roles occur.

Spilimbergo (2009) shows that foreign-educated individuals promote democracy in their home country, but only if the foreign education is acquired in democratic countries. Here, it is worth noting that most labour migrants are often uneducated and low-skilled and there is hardly any scope for them to achieve any kind of institutional education at host their countries. Also, South-South migration represent more than 50% of migration flows comparing to South-North migration (Ratha and Shaw 2007). Hence, Hadi’s (2001) claim Bangladeshi migrant bringing secular values from North does not represent the results of mass labor migration from Bangladesh to Middle Eastern countries. Hadi (2001) claims there is an increase in female children’s enrollment in schools in the migrant families in Bangladesh. However, the author fails to account if the men’s migration had any positive impact on reducing child marriage. The widespread practice of child or teen marriage are key reason behind drop out of female children from school in rural and impoverished communities of Bangladesh (Field and Ambrus 2008; Nahar et al. 2013; Chowdhury 2004). Moreover, many teen brides can be married to migrant men and there is a lack of research on such young left behind wives’ experience in Bangladesh. What changes men’s labour migration bring on gender roles and norms in Bangladesh remain largely unexplored.

### 3.2.3. Are Left-behinds Truly Left Behind?

Lastly, few studies oppose the representation of women as left behind. As Archambault (2010) argues, the term ‘left behind’ excludes the possibility that women actively choose to remain. Female domesticity, especially when contrasted with a husband’s mobile life, seems to signal a lack of agency on a woman’s part (Archambault 2010). Perhaps this is due to a tendency to slip migrant men and female stayers into the old paradigm of the gendered divide between the male public and female domestic domains (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974). Martha Mueller (1977) analyzed the position of rural wives in the context of Lesotho’s high level of male labor
migration, taking issue with both the then recently proposed public-domestic dichotomy and the bifurcation of rural and urban into separate social spaces. In rural Lesotho, she argued, women cherished their roles as mothers and producers more than their political positions within the village. Muller (1977) encourages an investigation into what women value in the places where they settle and how they gain access to those resources considered valuable. Similarly, Archambault (2010) argues on her research on rural wives of migrant men in Ugweno, Tanzania, while women can be regarded as tied to Ugweno for a number of economic and cultural reasons, many also wish to reside there because of the opportunities that Ugweno environment offers them. Like Muller (1977), Archambault (2010) also calls for rethinking the situation of rural stayers by exploring the residential decisions and the meanings that rural women attribute to their lives in the context of high rates of male out migration.

Scholars such as De Snyder (1993), Aysa and Massey (2004) emphasize from the point of view of the women involved, the consequences of their partners’ absence cannot always be captured in black-and-white terms. While women may increase a portion of power over some parts of their lives, they may lose power over others. Furthermore, what to outside observers may appear to be increased control of the women’s lives and decreased emancipation, to the women these outcomes may signal a partner’s love and care for themselves and their children (Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007). Gartaula et al. (2012) argue, women left behind are not passive observers but are actively engaged as strategic participants in the process of men’s migration.

This discussion, which complicates the representation of ‘left-behind’ women, demands a critical analysis of the experience of women who do not migrate following their male counterparts. In Kerala, labour migrants’ wives are known or called as ‘Gulf wives’ as male labour migration from Kerala is predominantly to the Gulf states (Zachariah et al. 2001). In Bangladesh also there is a general, rather derogatory term for labour workers, ‘Dubai Sramik’ or Dubai worker, which is often a blanket generalization for all labour workers in the Gulf. As the migration destinations vary in my data (not only Arab countries but also East Asia), I believe the term left-behind wives is more suitable than ‘Gulf wives’ to describe the women. It should also be highlighted that the term left-behind in this research is not used to portray the women as victims or passive, rather to enhance the scholarship on left-behind women in

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4 Dubai’s glamour and financial opportunities are often considered as the token for Gulf cities or Countries. As the word ‘Dubai’ itself is well known among people in general, it is often used when referring to Middle-Eastern or Gulf labour market.
Bangladesh or in broader South Asia. Particularly in Bangladesh where female labour migration is discouraged by both the community and the government, what aspects of the life women themselves desire and value are yet to be explored. In this thesis I aim to fill this gap.

**Conclusion**

Addressing my research question and sub-research questions requires an understanding of the contextual reality of Bangladeshi women, and how they negotiate their everyday life. I explain the local patriarchal norms related to women’s everyday life in this chapter. However, another significant aspect that largely influences everyday life of Bangladeshi people is the religion, Islam. Therefore, before moving on to my methods and discussion of the fields in chapter five, I now focus on the context of Islam in Bangladesh, in the next chapter. The religious context, how it is perceived and practiced, and its intersection with gender in the milieu of men’s migration; are crucial to understand women’s status in present day Bangladesh.
Chapter 4: Islam and Bangladesh Context

Introduction

This chapter outlines the religious context of Bangladesh. It highlights the complexity of gendered religious practices and related politics, which significantly affect Bangladeshi women’s status. I start the chapter with a brief account on how Islam was introduced in the Indian subcontinent. Next, I discuss the shifts from the formation of secular Bangladesh in 1971 to the growing Islamization in present day Bangladesh. I examine how religion is politicised, and how women’s dressing code is made to play crucial roles in maintaining such religious national identity. This chapter also details the ambiguity between Bengali and Muslim nationalism, and related gendered consequences.

Finally, in this chapter, I identify the position of left-behind women in the light of such conflicted ethno-religious background and class division in current Bangladesh.

4.1. Islamic Roots in Indian-Subcontinent

Bangladesh’s pre and post-colonial history cannot be ignored if we are to locate the origin of Islamist focus on gender. Historically, Islam was introduced to the South-Asian region through the military conquest by Seljuks and Mamluks5 (Sonn, 2004: 87). Mahmud, a Seljuk Muslim ruler with a Turkish background, established Islam in the region that is now known as Afghanistan and Pakistan (Hasan 2011). Mamluks established Islam’s lasting power-base in India (Sonn 2004: 88), during this period Sufis such as Baba Adam Shahid, Rumi visited Bengali-Speaking region of India (Khan 1985). Sufis historically have converted people from all walks of life (Khan 1985); however, Islam continued to remain an insignificant religion in this Hindu-dominated dynasty (Hasan 2011). The dramatic change in the situation, though, came with arrival of the Mughal dynasty; throughout the Mughal regime (1530-1757) Islam was expanded in the Indian sub-continent by the rules (Sonn 2002, 97). During that time, mostly Hindus were converted to Islam against the backdrop of serious discrimination that existed within Hindu communities due to the caste system (Alam 1993; Hossain 208; Khan 1985).

5 Seljuks was a Turk Sunni Muslim dynasty in the medieval West and Central Asia. Mamluks : In 1206, the Mamluk commander of the Muslim forces in India, proclaimed himself sultan, becoming, in effect, the first independent Sultan-e-Hind.
Alam (1993, 90) states that ‘folk beliefs and various non-Islamic principles, especially Hinduism, affected the shapes of Bengali Islam and could not be eliminated by the introduction of Islam in those areas’. From these historical accounts, it is clear that Muslims in the Bengali-speaking region have two roots of origin: i) Muslim roots: those who are descended from Seljuks, Mamluks, Mughal and ii) Hindu roots: converted (Hasan 2011). Political Islam arose in Bengal in the 17th century under the British regime against the backdrop of the sociological distinction of the Muslim community (Hasan 2011).

4.1.1. Birth of Secular Bangladesh in 1971

During colonial periods several communal riots broke out between Hindus and Muslims which eventually forced the British rulers to come up with a two-state solution: India for the Hindu majority and Pakistan (including today’s Bangladesh) for the Muslim majority in 1947 (Miaji 2010, Hasan 2011). Unfortunately, the partition of India was not the happy ending for Muslims of East Bengal (East Pakistan from 1947-1971/todays’ Bangladesh) because they once again experienced neo-colonialism under their West Pakistani rulers; during this time Bengali nationalism became more dominant over the Muslim identity due to the oppression from the Pakistani government (Hasan 2011). Whenever, the ruling West Pakistan faced rigid challenges from the autonomy movement in the East Pakistan, they stated that ‘Islam is in danger’ (Esposito et al. 1996; Siddiqi 1998). After a nine-month bloody battle war with Pakistan, Bangladesh became a separate nation on 16 December 1971. The experience of exploitation in the name of Islam and war of Liberation in 1971, led the post liberation politics of Bangladesh towards secularism (Riaz 2004; Kibria 2008). The primary government after the Independence was formed under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibar Rahman who led the nationalist movement against Pakistan. The constitution of Bangladesh in 1972 was based on the principle of secularism and Bangladesh was thus declared People’s Republic rather than an Islamic state (Miaji 2010). Sheikh Mujibar’s party Awami League also banned religion-based party Jamaat-e-Islami on account of its alleged collaboration with the West Pakistani military and perpetrating mass killing, plunder and rape of Bengali/East Pakistani civilians during the liberation war of 1971 (Miaji 2010, Siddiqi 1998).

4.1.2. Revival of Political Islam in Independent Bangladesh

After the murder of Sheikh Mujibar in a coup in 1975, the army took over the ruling system and it is during the two subsequent army regimes (1975-90) that numbers of measure were
taken to introduce and promote Islamic values in the state of Bangladesh (Hasan 2011). The two military regimes that were in power turned towards Islam in search of legitimacy for their rule (Naher 2010). Under general Zia, (1975-81), a constitutional amendment dropped secularism as a state principle and added “Absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah” in its place (Naher 2010; Miaji 2010). The military general Zia founder of Bangladesh National Party (BNP) also withdrew the ban imposed on Islamic Political parties, including Jamaat-e-Islami; and established a Ministry of Religious Affairs, encouraged the spread of Madrassa education, introduced a course on Islamic studies as a compulsory subject within government schools and gave special importance to Islamic programs in government-controlled media (Naher 2010). During this period, a huge amount of fund was released for the construction of mosques and madrassas and the establishment of the Bangladesh Madrassah education board (Ahamed and Nazneen 1990; Hossain 2006; Riaz 2004; Riaz 2008). Zia’s successor General Ershad expanded Islam in the state discourse even further by declaring it as ‘state religion’ in June 1988 through a constitutional amendment (Naher 2010; Hasan 2011). However, Bangladesh’s legal and judicial system is based on secular British law (Hasan 2011).

Since, secularism was removed from the constitution by the military regime, it was no longer a hindrance for political Islam to re-emerge (Miaji 2010; Hasan 2011). Ahamed and Nazneen (1990) mention, the construction of new mosques and the extension, repair, and beautification of old ones, in some cases with funds donated by West Asian and African Islamic states- have become a unique feature of the Islamic upsurge in Bangladesh.

A close reading of the history of Bangladesh reveals that the introduction of Islam in the public life of Bangladesh and the emergence of Jamaat-e islami is inter-connected (Hasan 2011). During 2001 election Bangladesh National party BNP won the election with help of other Islamic party including Jamaat-e- Islami who still won minor seats (Miaji 2010). During this period Jamaat-e-Islami took the opportunity to expand their ideology in the grassroots levels of the country. When BNP was engaged in sustaining their activists by way of tenders and corruption, Jamaat-e-Islami gathered all their resources and concentrated on appointing their activists in important posts in public services, by means of creating new posts where needed (Miaji 2010). As a result, Jamaat-e-Islami and other fundamental Islamists parties were rapidly increasing around the country in terms of funds, arms and manpower (Miaji 2010; Hussain 2010; Hasan 211). These Islamist groups are seen as problems by the progressives, as these groups deny equal rights to women and compel men to grow beard and women to wear Burka (Miaji 2010; Naher 2010). However, Huque and Akhter (1987) have argued, Bangladeshis are
gradually and systematically trained to grow up and live in a society where Islamic values predominate, and they contribute to its transmission from one generation to next. Islamic etiquette is gradually entrenched in the children from parents and Islamic influences build up strength long before political, economic, or other social forces are able to leave impressions on the minds of the citizens (Huque and Akhter 1987, 209).

4.2. Current State of Islam, Politics, and Status of Women in Bangladesh

In 2008 election, pro-liberation party Bangladesh Awami league, widely known as ‘secularist party’ formed the present government under the leadership of a Muslim lady, Sheikh Hasina who is also the daughter of Sheikh Mujibar Rahman, founding father of Bangladesh. The Jamaat-e-Islami only won two seats in this election (Hasan 2011). However, despite this election result, the Islamist movement seems to have a longstanding impact on the Bangladesh society (Hussain 2010; Hasan 2010). Moreover, this impact is evidenced by the fact that elites and secular politicians use Islamic idioms, phrases, rituals and regularly make Islamic pilgrimages to Mecca (Hussain 2010).

Given the rise of Islam in Bangladeshi political discourse and social life, the major political parties of Bangladesh have not shown any interest to challenge the widely held notions about gender norms invoked by Islamists (Naher 2010). In addition, neither of the two main parties (BNP and Awami League) have been prepared to risk a conservative backlash by coming out strongly in support of women’s rights (Rozario 2006). However, this tradition of not challenging political Islam by the politicians in Bangladesh has been a continuous norm since 1980s. As Huque and Akhter rightly (1987, 207) state:

Generally, the people of Bangladesh have strong attachments to Islam, and no one among the rulers and the ruled would risk retribution by opposing or criticising religious customs, practices and beliefs. A large number of Bangladeshis do not perform the mandatory religious practices, but most display their devotion to Islam in Public. The slightest aspersion on Islam results in hostile public reaction, which is why neither the government, nor the opposition political parties of Bangladesh speak out against Islam.

It may also be noted that Awami league-led alliance itself included some Islamist groups (Naher 2010). According to Bangladesh Bureau Statistics 2011, 90.4% of the total population of Bangladesh is Muslim. Hence, the ruling Sheikh Hasina’s party Awami league believe they
need to maintain and display their Islamic identity to the Muslim public/voters strongly, because the opposition party BNP with jamaat-e-Islami ties accuse and brand Awami league as anti-Islamic party.

The Awami League government have been fighting Islamic militancy in the country. However, it has remained silent and reluctant to condemn the attacks on secular and atheist bloggers, writers and LGBT activists. Those attacks carried out by local Islamist terrorists and its supporters that occurred between 2013 to 2018. Government fears that condemning attacks on atheist bloggers can brand the government as anti-Islamic. The government also seems to be fulfilling Islamists party’s demand such as: recognizing qaumi Madrassas’ Dawra certificate equivalent to a post graduate degree and removing a Greek sculpture from the Supreme Court premise (Alamgir 2017; Mamun 2017). Progressives in Bangladesh perceive Awami league’s or prime minister Sekh Hasina’s such actions as political trick to re-elect in then next election (in 2018), and to avoid a hostile relation with the Islamist Parties. However, regarding Qaumi madrassa certificates, the government’s logic is by only recognizing such education system the government can control and update it. There are about 1,400,000 students in the 13,902 Qawmi madrasas across the country and no society can move forward while keeping this vast populace out of the mainstream (Alamgir 2017).

From the above discussion, it is fairly clear that religion and politics are inseparable in Bangladesh. How this affects the life of Bangladeshi people, particularly of women has not overlooked in the literature. I turn to Dina Siddiqi’s (2011, 78) statement as she mentions:

The way women’s bodies and how they are used and abused continue to act as codes for a nation’s civilizational status. For Muslim countries, women’s status carries an even greater burden.

Although, Siddiqi (2011) stated this to analyse how transnational feminist views often misinterpret local realities for women, in short, what Western feminists consider ‘development’ for third world’s women, may not be the ‘development’ sought by the women from third world countries. I merely mentioned Siddiq’s words to emphasize that how religion and politics have been shaping women’s identity and status in Bangladesh. In the following sections I discuss it further.

As discussed in chapter two, Purdah is the term used primarily in South Asia, (from Persian: meaning "curtain") to describe in the South Asian context, the global religious and social
practice of female seclusion that is associated with Muslim communities. *Purdah* to Muslim women in Bangladesh regardless the class division means dressing modestly, not to be loud and open in public especially when men are surrounded. Bengali women have traditionally worn the Bengali dress, *Sari* and cover their heads with one end of this dress, which symbolically indicates *Purdah* for them (Hussain 2010). Muslim Bengali women observed such *Purdah* long before the *burkha* was introduced (Feldman and McCarthy 1983, 953). Feldman and McCarthy’s (1983) research also indicates, *Burkha* was introduced in that particular Bangladeshi village (where the research took place) for the first time when men returned from *Haj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) and brought *burkhas* with them for the women of the family. Hussain (2010) argues, the increasing number of women wearing *Hijab* is a culture imported from Middle Eastern countries. This new veiling dress has questioned the effectiveness of the Bengali dress *Sari* for maintaining women’s modesty; however, the *Sari* symbolizes Bengali nationalism, while the hijab symbolizes Muslim nationalism (Hussain 2010).

Bengali Muslims in recent past, had been considered as less orthodox than most other Muslims because Bangladeshi Islam contains roots or elements of Hinduism, Sufism and Buddhism (O’Connell 2001; Roy 1986). Even today, Muslims in Bangladesh follows some norms that derived from Hinduism such as *gaye holud* (Putting turmeric paste on brides and grooms during marriage ceremonies). Regional sex-ratio variation is not attributed to a Muslim presence and the patterns of kinship and gender relations are thought to have largely preceded contact with Islam; Muslims in South Asia generally live by cultural practices close to those of local non-Muslims (Dyson and Moore 1983: 53; Mandelbaum 1970). But the growing trend of political Islam (most of the time sponsored by the religious political party such as Jamaat-e-Islami) is redefining Bengali Muslim identities by rejecting Bengali cultural practices and labelling them as pre-Islamic or un-Islamic (Hussain 2010).

Until recently, the subordinate status of women in Bangladesh could largely be understood by the reference to local patriarchal Bengali gender values which were common to all the Bengalis, whether Muslim, Hindu, Christian or Buddhist (Rozario 2006). Bengali middle-class men’s concept of ideal wife was based on the colonial British concept of the wife as ‘helpmeet’ (one who helps her husband) (Hussain 2010). However, the modernised Muslim Bangladeshi

6 Burkha is a long, loose garment covering the whole body from head to feet, worn in public by women in many Muslim countries.

7 Hijab is a head covering worn in public by some Muslim women.
middle class women are allowed to do jobs and get education as long as it is permitted by the men; and women maintain Pudrah.

**Image 4.1:** Rural Bangladeshi women wearing *Sari* and covering their heads with end part of *Sari*.

![Image of women wearing Sari](image1.jpg)

Source: Walsh (2014)

**Image 4.2:** Rural Bangladeshi early teenage girls wearing *Salwar Kamij* and covering their head with *Orna* (scarf).

![Image of teenage girls wearing Salwar Kamij](image2.jpg)

Source: Green Left (2013)
In Bangladesh the Islamist forces are trying to shape the religious and moral foundation of society and veiling women becomes a medium for expressing Islamic identity (Hussain 2010). Besides traditional madrassas Islamists are expanding religious education and their ideology among secular and English-speaking young people who lives in urban cities in Bangladesh. While the Islamists are modernizing themselves by learning English, and using computers; at the same time, they oppose Western ideology. They are also including women into their business/Islamic organizations and encouraging them to wear hijab while at job and thus creating a modern Islamic women identity (Hussain 2010). Muslim Bangladeshi women in Hussain’s (2010, 329) research mention, ‘as a result of cultural flows from abroad, modern westernized women are accepting jeans and shirt as a style from the West, while modern Muslim women are accepting hijab as a fashion from the Middle Eastern countries’.

However, discussion on gender and religion should be based on a critical analysis of the given context. As Lara Deeb (2009) has suggested, political and social contexts are critical aspects of modern formations of piety and are context specific. Hence, even if there is a strong influence of Islamization in Bangladesh, one should be aware of how these discourses are presented in the literature. For example, Sarah White (1992, 134) has noted in her work on problematic narrative/action of Western aid in Bangladesh that “international aid agencies got the right to intervene in Bangladesh’s (an Islamic state) most private place, its women’s bodies.” Often being modern refers to being on the other side of Islamization in Bangladesh, and this notion should not be accepted uncritically.

Yet, Rozario (2006) in her research discovered that the version of Islam the young women in Bangladesh are driven into by the Islamists is a radical version of Islam and very different from the Islamic feminist reading of the Quraan8 by authors like Mernissi (1991) or other liberal modernist Muslim scholars. It is understandable that questioning ‘religious’ practices can be problematic and often not even an option for young girls growing up in a country that has an overwhelmingly Muslim population. But the framework of Islam that is being presented to the veiled women seems to contain little or nothing that is emancipatory to them (Rozario 2006; Hussain 2010). Bangladeshi scholar Farah Chowdhury (2009) rightly argues that women are oppressed through a misinterpretation of Islam by Bangladeshi men and a section of little-learned religious leaders. Chowdhury (2009, 610) also quotes Benazir Bhutto (1988) the former

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8 Quraan is the central religious text of Islam
Prime Minister of Pakistan and the first woman to lead the government of a Muslim country, who writes, ‘we learned at an early age that it was men’s interpretation of our religion that restricted women’s opportunities, not our religion itself.’ While Bhutto’s (1988) statement certainly represent the circumstances of almost every Islamic society, the key point here to make is that not all young women grow up with equal education and financial stability that would enable them to challenge such misinterpretation of Islam by the powerful men. Hence, the women often reinforce what they learned from the society and often do so to be on the safe side.

**Image 4.3: Sub-urban Muslim Bangladeshi women wearing Burka.**

As mentioned above, the imported culture of veil and Burka from Middle Eastern countries has created a modern Muslim women identity among the mass lower-middle and middle-class women in Bangladesh. White (2010) notes, in Bangladesh, there is also an increase in veiling and public practice of Islamic rituals *namaz*⁹ among the wider public. Men’s migration to Middle Eastern countries has acted as a strong force in the Islamization process in Bangladesh (Siddiqi 2006; Kibria 2008; Gardner and Osella 2003). Sohela Nazneen (2018) mentions

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⁹ *Namaz* refers to the ritual prayers prescribed by Islam to be observed five times a day.
several factors that have influenced the Bangladeshi middle-class to endorse a more explicit presence of Islam in public life. These include: the rise of Islamic nationalism in Bangladesh since the 1990s; the rise of anti-Islam sentiments in the Western world and in neighbouring India; and the change in access to communications technology (Nazneen 2018, 206).

Thus, *burkha* and *hijab* today in Bangladesh symbolizes ‘modernity’, security and little ‘agency’ for women of middle and lower middle class. On the other hand, poor women who work in garment factories or as maid servants in affluent households, do not wear *Burkha* or *hijab*. Many poor women simply cannot afford to buy *Burkha*. *Purdah* rules seem to be more flexible for poor women (Hussain 2010) compared to their middleclass counterparts.

Lack of opportunities for women in a patriarchal society, the culture of blaming women’s ‘non-Islamic dressing style and behaviour’ in sexual harassment cases; all these have also encouraged middle class women to embrace *Burkha* and *Hijab*. It may even be argued that many middle-class women are envious of their lower-class sisters, who have seemingly gained some form of economic empowerment from their paid employment, and who, because of their economic role appear to command some sense of personal freedom (Rozario 2006). But at the same time, middle class women do not want to be subjected themselves to the same kind of risks and vulnerability that the lower-class women go through to get there. As Rozario (2006, 375) explains:

> Middle-class educated women are exposed to the various media reports about the harassment faced by the lower-class women in the process of undertaking their new economic role and be part of the ‘modern’ and globalized economy. So, although they might feel a tinge of envy about these women’s ‘freedom’ and their ability to negotiate their ways in the public sphere, they essentially look down upon these women because of their loss of honour by entering into the men’s sphere. This is how they maintain their distance from and superiority to these lower-class women.

Rozario’s (2006) explanation of class division of Bangladeshi women is crucial for understanding the status of my female research participants, whom I interviewed for this thesis. Where do they stand between these middle class and lower-class Muslim identities and what roles husbands’ migration play in it? In the following section I discuss it further.

4.3. Locating the Left-behind Wives: Transition towards Respectable ‘Modern’ Muslim Women/Housewife
My research participants, migrants’ wives from the poor and lower middle-class section of Bangladesh in rural and sub-urban context. While women from the villages in Bogura district represent both poor and lower middle class, the sub-urban women from Munshiganj are mostly lower middle class. Although my research participants are not from the middle-class background, they are still exposed to modern technologies such as phones and Internet. They use phones mostly to talk with their migrant husbands. Some young wives also watch Bengali movies and songs on You Tube. Even though the village women do not have the habit of reading newspapers (newspapers do not even reach such remote villages) they are still aware of the facts that female garments workers, maid servants and even female migrants are victims of sexual harassments, bad working condition and humiliation. Hence, these left behind wives do not seek for an independent life where they have to work and earn a livelihood, at the same time, those income generation roles would cause them social embarrassment. Since, they already hail from a poor background, they do not want a life of more humiliation rather, a life of respectable status is desired. They recognize being married and maintaining Purdha they can achieve a reputable life. And if husbands’ economic background improves (through migration or other jobs/business), they can step into a slightly upper-class status. There is general respect for the modern Muslim housewife identity.

Debnath and Selim (2009, 137) claim, men’s labour migration from Bangladesh has recreated the phenomenon ‘housewifization’, a term coined by Maria Mies (1986). According to Mies (1986), housewifization is the process by which women are socially defined as housewives, dependent for their sustenance on the income of a husband. Housewifization is promoted vigorously by capitalism as it promotes capitalist construction of women, home, domestic sphere as a strategy for capital accumulation (Izzati 2016). Under classic patriarchy and Muslim society this process of Housewifization may have additional meaning in Bangladesh. My ethnography on labour migrants’ wives in rural Bangladesh, aims to highlight this ‘modern’ Muslim housewife identity and its wider implications in these women’s lives.

In Bangladeshi society, marriage is a must for all (Chowdhury 2009), and after a certain age mature unmarried women pose a grave risk to the honour of their families (Rozario 2006). In rural and impoverished community such tension begins when girls become teenagers. Little girls grow up with the concept that outside of marriage they will be anomalous and stigmatised in their society (Rozario 2006; Chowdhury 2004). Thus, for the impoverished women and girls also, like their middle-class counter parts, marriage means certainty and security of life. Only in adverse cases for example, death of husband, divorce, domestic violence, or in extreme
poverty, poor women are forced to get manual jobs. As Cain et al. (1979) found in Bangladesh, certain women have in likelihood always been vulnerable to loss of protection. These include infertile women and women who for one reason or another have run afoul of the structures of dependence in which their sexual birth right places them—widows; spinsters too old, ugly, or black to marry; unmarried mothers; divorcees; etc. (Ellickson 1972). Also, such manual jobs come with its own risks and sense of embarrassment in wider society. Amin (1996, 226) in the context of Bangladesh mentions:

When women work for cash, the fact of their publicly engaging in work in violation of Purdah causes them to lose status. In addition to the loss of status, moreover, women earn considerably less doing jobs equivalent to those performed by men; in any given workplace, different specializations are identified by gender, and more often than not, male positions have higher status than women’s.

Therefore, I argue that the pressure of saving the honour is more on poor and lower middle-class women than it is on the middle-class women. Middle class women strive to maintain their respectable status, while poor women strive to upgrade to a respectable status.

Conclusion

In most South Asian countries, religion is repeatedly politicised. This chapter highlighted that both national and international politics have contributed in the growth of Islamization in current Bangladesh. Men’s labour migration to Middle Eastern countries, is also identified as one of the reasons behind this Islamization. In such context, certain women’s public roles and dressing styles are largely affected. In this chapter, I have provided an analysis of the current state of politics and religion, and how these have shaped Bangladeshi women’s identity. Understanding this religious context is essential to evaluate the changes in women’s status in the milieu of men’s migration. Finally, in this chapter, I identified the position of left-behind women and the process of housewifization in the context of class and religion in Bangladesh

In the next chapter, I explain such class and religious background of the target research participants further, under the discussion of the field sites.
Chapter 5: Methodology

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the methodology I used to explore my research questions. I begin with a discussion of research design and method using a feminist approach. Next, I explain why I chose to use certain research methods and not others and reflect on my chosen methods from a feminist perspective. I then focus on explaining the research process and how I gained access to participants, designed my sample and analysed the data. Overall, this chapter discusses the rationale behind the site selection for the fieldwork and the description of those sites, and the adoption of a feminist ethnographic approach combined with participant observation and semi-structured interviews to collect data. Lastly, I discuss research ethics and the challenges I faced while conducting the fieldwork.

5.1. Research Design and Methodology

The impact of men’s labour migration on their non-migrating wives has received a growing amount of research attention in a variety of settings across Africa, Latin America, Europe and Asia. Despite this geographic and cultural diversity, several common themes and findings have emerged from the studies (Yabiku et al. 2010, 294). The majority of these studies have used quantitative methods. Some researchers have admitted that in-depth qualitative studies could help to overcome the lack of data on the ‘unmeasured variable of husband’s absence’ (Yabiku et al. 2010, 296; Hadi 2001, 53-61). While quantitative studies have provided generalized themes on left-behind women’s status, qualitative research can shed light on the aspects of women’s lives (each woman’s unique story) that cannot be covered in quantitative studies using closed survey questions. Qualitative research is suitable for eliciting subtle and sensitive experiences of human life that cannot be captured through quantitative research. It is this quality and richness of response to a social situation which qualitative research aims for (Basit 2003, 151).

To answer my research questions, I studied the everyday life of my research participants. My primary research methods in the villages were participant observation and face-to-face interviews. I decided to stay in the village to partake in and understand the world of the villagers. Participant observation is often considered to be the pillar of anthropological method (Ahmed, 2014), and thus vital in this study not only as research process but also as research philosophy. It allowed an inclusive understanding of the context and assisted me to make the
crucial distinction between ‘life as lived, life as experienced, and life as told’ (Bruner 1984, 267).

Some methodologists perceive ethnography as the category of participant observation that focuses on the representation of culture and meaning. Others see participant observation as an ethnographic, a variety of data collection. According to Preissle and Grant (2003, 164), they can be parallel, even overlapping, research approaches which are differentiated by their disciplinary histories and their conceptual frameworks. Both developed as means of studying and documenting the lives of those presumed to be different from those either funding or conducting the study (Preissle and Grant 2003). My aim was to use the most effective combination of ethnographic research applying participant observation (in the village setting) and semi-structured interviews (in both village and suburban settings) to explore the impacts of men’s migration on left-behind women.

Observation methods are beneficial to researchers in a range of ways. They provide ways for researchers to examine nonverbal expression of feelings, determine who interacts with whom, grasp how participants communicate with each other, and check for how much time is spent on various activities (Schmuck, 1997). Participant observation permits researchers to inspect definitions of terms that participants use in interviews, observe events that informants may be unable or unwilling to share when doing so would be ‘impolitic, impolite, or insensitive, and observe situations informants have described in interviews, thereby making them aware of distortions or inaccuracies in description provided by those informants’ (Marshall & Rossman 1995, 85). During my fieldwork in the villages, one left behind woman mentions that she is proud of the way of life for village women (e.g. early marriages, purdah). A migrant man from the village states he believes a girl’s honour is in her marriage for the villagers, and he emphasizes that someone like myself from the town can rightly disagree with him. Therefore, during my analysis and interpretation I am committed to presenting my study participants’ voice and reality accurately, even though my interpretations may differ from theirs.

Merriam (1998) suggests that the highest priority in determining what a researcher should observe is the researcher's purpose for conducting the study in the first place. "Where to begin looking depends on the research question, but where to focus or stop action cannot be determined ahead of time" (Merriam 1998, 97). The majority of my data are from the villages of the Bogura district where I was able to stay and conduct participant observation of the everyday life of left-behind wives and a few non-migrant families. This access to the setting
strengthens my research as it generated additional data on the, the relationship between left behind mothers and daughters in-laws, and village life in general. It allowed me to gather data on questions that are often not easy to put directly to a participant. It also facilitated my data collection when interviewing the village migrant men, for example, allowing them to express attitudes and opinions that were not necessarily related to my questions.

I conducted interviews in both rural and suburban locations, and hence, the transcripts form the bulk of the data for this research. A semi-structured format was chosen because it allows responses to be compared as well as allowing the interviewer flexibility to digress and to probe based on interactions during the interview (Blee and Taylor, 2002). Semi-structured interviews are particularly useful in studies where the goals are not to test hypotheses but to explore, discover, and interpret complex social events and processes. They are compatible with with participant observation, documentary, or visual data (Morris 1984; McAdam 1988; Whittier 1995). The objective, therefore, is to begin with an area of inquiry and identify relevant themes in the data. The chosen interview method was found to be successful in enabling reciprocity between the interviewer and participant (Galletta 2012), enabling the interviewer to improvise follow-up questions based on participant’s responses (Hardon et al. 2004, Rubin & Rubin 2011). Thus, the combination of semi-structured interviews and participant observation (in the villages) allows me to conduct an ethnography-rich research.

While quantitative approaches are valuable for uncovering patterns in large samples, qualitative approaches are more suited for my objectives of gathering complex life experiences and interpreting them in the context of people’s sociocultural environment. By investigating everyday life, qualitative studies have focused, for the most part, on process (Kalekin-Fishman 2013, 723): for example, how the household is organized (Pink, 2004; Shove, 2003), how the demands of home and work are balanced (Nippert-Eng, 1996), to create a vivid description of daily life. Qualitative work can be judged on its freshness - its ability to discover new themes and new explanations - than on its generalizability; qualitative study is also evaluated for its richness and accuracy in describing complex situations or cultures (Rubin and Rubin 2011, 16). In quantitative studies, researchers have to plan in advance all the information they need to acquire, leaving no place for surprise data; whereas qualitative researchers can continually add themes and interpretations to their models from field notes (Becker 1996). Quantitative description limits what can be learned about the meanings participants give to events (Sandelowski 2000, 336). For all of these reasons I adopted a qualitative, everyday life
approach. The lack of qualitative research on women left behind in Bangladesh is one of the key reasons that motivated me to conduct this study in the first place.

My intention is not to reject a quantitative research approach on principle. Studies have shown that the elevation of a distinction between types of data to the level of a research paradigm is unhelpful and inappropriate (Blaikie 2009, 204; Guba and Lincoln 2005, 191-215). It is well established now that both qualitative and quantitative research can be equally valid, according to the framing of the research questions. I chose qualitative method as it suits my research goals (to reveal data related to social norms and practices in everyday settings) and resources. The following sections explain how the qualitative orientation is understood as a form of feminist practice.

5.1.1. Qualitative Research: Naturalist and Feminist Methods

Qualitative research is informed by a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings, such as "real world setting where the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest" (Patton 2002, 39). Naturalists accept that there is a reality but argue that it cannot be measured directly, only perceived by people, each of whom views it through the lens of his or her prior experience, knowledge, and expectations (Rubin and Rubin 2011, 16). This understanding of the social world is similar to a feminist approach that recognizes knowledge as socially constructed gendered (Stanley and Wise 1990; Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002). Feminist methodology aspires to be gentle, the interviewer takes pains not to dominate the interviewee, and works to build a friendly relationship with the interviewee; researchers are cautious of not to impose their expectations on interviewees (Rubin and Rubin 2011, 21).

The foundation of feminist method is a critique of the natural and social sciences focused or centred on men that omits or distorts women’s experiences (Blaikie 2009, 103). Since the second half of the twentieth century, the development of feminist methodology has been a continuous process. In the next section, I briefly analyse one of the major traditions of feminist method that is feminist standpoint theory.

5.1.2. Beyond Feminist Standpoint Theory

Since the 1980s, many feminist scholars have proposed arguments for and against feminist standpoint theory. Nancy Harstock (1983) defines feminist standpoint as an exclusive
standpoint in society that offers validation for the reality claims of feminism while also providing it with a system with which to investigate truth. Dorothy Smith (1997) notes that a key problem of feminist standpoint theory is its conversion from abstract concept to concrete example. Smith (1997) strongly supports Sandra Harding’s (1986) assertion that feminist standpoint does not intend to generate a new theoretical field but to examine the facts and difficulties of feminist work through locating knowledge or inquiry in women’s standpoint or in women’s experience.

One of the criticisms of feminist standpoint theory is that the heterogeneities in women’s standpoints impede structural interpretation. ‘The experience of “women” is ontologically fractured and complex because all women do not share one single reality’ (Stanley and Wise 1990, 22). Susan Hekman (1997) argues, if the multiplicity of feminist standpoints is considered (class, age, ethnicity and many other experiences), coherent analysis becomes impossible due to too many axes of analysis; since every woman is unique, analysing each in her uniqueness prevents systemic analysis. Hence, authentic feminist research should acknowledge the diversity in the data, before claiming a unitary conclusion. I used this insight while interpreting the data in the analysis chapters (five to eight) of this thesis.

Similarly, I am aware of the heterogeneities among my research participants in terms of their socio-demographic contexts. While presenting data from my research, I aim to reflect each of my study participants’ unique experiences. Women’s experience may vary surprisingly depending on their class, living arrangements, age and educational level, even though they live in similar villages. An example of this is mentioned in chapter seven where I analysed my data on how women who share a similar background (the same village context) experience the impact of practicing Burkha in strikingly diverse ways. Likewise, return migrant men’s experiences can vary depending on their economic and educational background, and this may lead to differences in the way they perceive women’s roles in their families. Standpoint theory should not be understood in terms of gender only, but also in terms of religion, generation and locality. I pay particular attention when representing these diversities among the study participants.

Stanley and Wise (1990,25) call for a ‘feminist standpoint’ epistemology which argues that feminist research should not only be located in, but proceed from, the grounded analysis of women’s material realities. To measure the changes in left behind women’s position, hence, I did not only interview women. I also explored the experiences and perspectives of return
migrant men to evaluate those changes in women’s lives with migrant husbands. My aim, therefore, is not to test any previous theory on left behind women’s status, but to present the reality of their current position grounded in the data.

5.1.3. Notes on Reflexivity

Feminist researchers have strongly influenced the development of research methods where researchers are reflexive in the research process, watchful of power dynamics between the researcher and the study participants, and thoughtful of how knowledge is formed, recognised and who represents that knowledge (Stanley and Wise 1990; Maynard 1994; Charles 1996; Sampson et al. 2008). The skill to get into the world of someone who does not share one’s own lenses requires an ability to identify and then suspend one’s own cultural assumptions long enough to see and understand another’s (Gergen 1999, 50). It follows that reflexivity in feminist research is a crucial requirement, not just to provide the female participants a voice but to present their experience in their own voice.

In my research, I investigate women’s status in the family and in the wider community while their husbands are absent for a prolonged period, and I do so by presenting the women’s own voices through direct quotation and paraphrase. I include men’s voices as well, to evaluate changes in gender relations in the milieu of men’s labour migration. I maintain the reflexivity of my research by not imposing my own understanding of their lives. I created a non-controlling relationship with my study participants. It was necessary to ensure that I let interviewees tell their stories rather than ‘push’ them to specific directions, that I hear what is said, and that I check how I filter what I hear through the lens of my experience and refrain from implication (Padgett 2008). I follow Roni Berger’s (2013, 225) approach who argues for ‘minimizing researcher’s agenda’ and maximizing the space for interviewees to tell their story.

‘No research is free of the biases, assumptions, and personality of the researcher and we cannot separate self from those activities in which we are intimately involved’ (Sword 1999, 277). Reflexivity, the ‘active acknowledgement by the researcher that her/his own actions and decisions will inevitably impact upon the meaning and context of the experience under investigation’ (Horsburgh 2003, 309), is a prime measure used in qualitative research to secure credibility, trustworthiness, and nonexploitative research by self-scrutinization of the lens through which the researcher views the phenomenon studied (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000; Scott 1997). Hence, it is important to state that as an urban unmarried female researcher with studying and living abroad experiences there are implications in this research based on how I
was perceived by my participants and the final conclusion I derive from this research. This is further discussed under 5.6 Ethics and Positionality in this chapter.

Nonetheless, I must emphasise that my gender played a beneficial role in this research, particularly when interviewing my female participants who consist majority of the interviewees (more than half of my research participants are females). Respondents may be more willing to share their experiences with a researcher whom they perceive as sympathetic to their situation (De Tona 2006). Seeing myself as a young woman, female participants felt free to ask questions about my personal life (e.g. marital status) as well as more about the purpose of this research. This helped to build rapport between us, and they felt comfortable sharing their experiences.

5.2. Nonprobability Sampling

Purposive selection rather than random sampling defined the population of respondents (Miles and Huberman 1994). Qualitative research uses non-probability sampling as it does not aim to produce a statistically representative sample. A phenomenon need only appear once in the sample (Wilmot 2005, 3), because representing the target population is not the goal with nonprobability samples (Blackstone 2012; Blaikie 2009, 176). Nonprobability samples are used in full-blown research projects where the researcher’s goal is in-depth understanding rather than more generalisation (Blackstone 2012).

In purposive sampling the number of people interviewed is less important than the criteria used to select them. Known characteristics of individuals are used as the basis of selection, most often chosen to reflect the diversity and breadth of the target group (Wilmot 2005, 3). Time and resource limitations inevitably put some restrictions on sample size in qualitative studies. It is more useful to think of selecting cases for intensive study, rather than prioritizing the number of participants (Blaikie 2009, 186). In the present research, the target for semi-structured interviews and participant observations is the population of left-behind women and migrant men (returnees and also those who were on leave). I aimed to interview all of the eligible women in this category in each of the selected villages.

5.2.1. Data Collection and Research Locations

I conducted total 51 voice recorded interviews in two districts of Bangladesh: Bogura and Munshiganj, over the period of three months from October 2017 to December 2017. 36 participants are from four villages under Bogura districts and 15 participants are from Sub-
urban Munshiganj. Among the 51 participants 35 are the left-behind wives and 16 are the migrant men.

Additional to the 36 participants from the four villages of Bogura district, I interviewed a Member (a government representative, elected by the votes of the villagers). Members are not government officials, but often local politicians. Each Member is allocated five to six villages, and Members are the first contact for the villagers when they encounter problems such as: disputes with neighbours, marital disputes, robbery etc. The Member I interviewed is responsible for four villages of Bogura district where most of my research participants belong. In addition to that I interviewed a female NGO worker from the Harvanga village, Bogura district. I conducted a few informal interviews without the voice recorder with the villagers and noted down core themes that came out of such conversations in my field diary.

The next 15 interviews I conducted in Munshiganj district, close to capital city Dhaka. Initially, I intended to cover mostly the villages, from the Bogura district, as I have better access to the villagers through my personal contacts. I physically visited all the left-behind women’s (interviewees’) houses in the villages of Bogura and conducted their interviews. However, later I decided to include some left-behind women’s experience from a different location, preferably from a place close to the capital city. The choice of a contrasting setting was to allow scope to compare the significance of culture and context. Particularly, for this purpose, I decided to interview participants from Munshiganj Sadar (sub-district) and not from more remote villages of Munshiganj. This allowed me to study participants from a variety of backgrounds. I explored the everyday life of my participants in order to understand how women in different settings and circumstances negotiate the absence of their husbands.

According to BMET (Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training) data, Cumilla district in Bangladesh is home to highest number of migrant households. 66,335 numbers of migrants hail from Cumilla district in Bangladesh (BMET 2019). Ideally, I would have preferred to conduct my fieldwork in Cumilla for this research. But due to the time and resource limitations (e.g. lack of access or key informants to be specific), it was not feasible. Hence, I selected the two above mentioned districts. When entering the field, there are a number of events that must be considered. These include choosing a site, gaining permission, selecting key informants, and familiarizing oneself with the setting or culture (Bernerd, 1994). As Barbara Kawulich (2005) notes, in qualitative social research one must choose a site that will facilitate easy access to the data. The objective is to collect data that will help answer the research questions
According to BMET (2019) data, the number of overseas migrant workers from Bogura district is 8,744 and 15,714 from Munshiganj, while the lowest number of migrant workers (423) are from the hill track district Bandarban. These figures show that both Bogura and Munshiganj are home to significant numbers of overseas migrant workers. Acquiring data from these two districts (in contrast to the model district Cumilla) can enrich the migration literature in Bangladesh.

Primary data collection was through participant observation (conducted only in the villages) and semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are often preceded by observation and informal interaction to allow the researcher to develop a keen understanding of the topic of interest necessary for developing relevant and meaningful semi-structured questions. I adjusted the language of the interview according to the respondents’ circumstances (young women, adult men and women). For example, to probe return men migrants’ attitudes towards gender roles (for example: division of household responsibility, women’s status in the community and social expectations towards men and women) I questioned them about their exposure to gender relations abroad by semi structured questions. And I explored whether that experience had influenced how they perceive gender relations in their home country Bangladesh. For this purpose, in the first phase of interview I collected baseline demographic and socioeconomic data, including age, level of education.

I did not expect to stay in the field during my writing up and data analysis period, so I took every possible step to keep my data accurate while conducting the interviews. While recording and taking notes, I asked my participants if they were happy with the details, they shared with me, and I sought their permission to present those data (including photos in some cases) in my research outputs. In qualitative paradigms the terms credibility, neutrality, consistency and transferability should be the essential criteria for quality (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Reliability and validity are conceptualized as trustworthiness, rigor and quality (Golafshani 2003, 604). It is also through this association that the ways to achieve validity and reliability from the qualitative researchers’ perspective are to eliminate bias and increase the researcher’s truthfulness of a proposition about some social phenomenon (Denzin, 1978). As I mentioned earlier, I remained vigilant not to impose my understanding of my research participants’ lives on them. In the field I kept in mind the declaration in Stanley and Wise (1990, 23): researchers’ understandings are necessarily temporally, intellectually, politically and emotionally grounded and are thus as contextually specific as those of ‘the researched’. Aspects of my own position as a researcher are discussed below in section 5.6.
5.3. Discussion of the Field Sites

In this section, I provide a brief description of my field work locations, how I gained access and my initial observation of the field. Below is the map of Bangladesh (Figure 5.1), in which the two districts where I conducted this study are circled. Figures 5.2 and 5.3 provide further details of the administrative structure and demographics respectively.
Figure 5.1: Map of Bangladesh. Field work locations highlighted

Source: Oliveria (2016)
Bangladesh is divided into eight divisions and 64 districts. To facilitate the role and duty of local government, it is further divided into Upazila (Sub-districts), Municipalities, city corporations and union councils (rural councils).

The diagram bellow summarizes my fieldwork locations in Bangladesh.
Figure 5.3: Diagram of my fieldwork locations

Divisions

Rajshahi

District: Bogura

Sub-District/Upazila: Adamdighi
Has population about 187012.

Union Council:
Kundogram

27 Villages.
I carried out my interviews in following four villages

Bagichapara:
Has around 80 households. I interviewed nine left-behind women.

Harvanga:
Has around 60 households. I interviewed nine left-behind women.

Harinmara:
Has around 100 households. I interviewed 11 male migrants and five left-behind women.

Bhebra Para:
Hindu village. It has around 25 households. I interviewed two left behind women. As, only two men from this village are labour migrants.

Dhaka

District: Munshiganj

Sub-District/Upazila: Munshiganj Sadar
Has population about 399560. I interviewed ten left-behind women and five male migrants.
5.3.1. Gaining Access and Field Visit to the Villages in Bogura

After my ethics application was approved by the College of Business, Law, Education and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee Bangor University in July 2017, I started the logistical preparations for my fieldwork. I arrived in Bangladesh in the first week of September 2017. During my initial stays in Dhaka, I translated the participant information sheets, consent forms and research description sheets into Bengali. I tried contacting the government official of the Adamdigi sub-district) in which the villages are located, by telephone as emails are often not widely used in sub -district levels. However, he was unavailable for that period. It meant that my personal contacts (my relatives) from the village became an essential source of support. They not only helped me finding my participants, but also accommodated me in the village Harvanga for 20 days.

I left for Bogura from Dhaka towards the end of September 2017. Upon my arrival in the village, I worked with my relative and a community leader on participant sheets, consent forms etc. one more time. But, as my relative suggested, villagers would probably feel more comfortable without any papers included. He had already visited some-left behind women’s households and mentioned my research. As he is a local from the village, the villagers trusted him without any hesitation. Since I was living in my relative’s house in Harvanga village, I also started talking to next door neighbours and started conducting my participant observation and some informal conversations (without voice recorder) with both migrants and non-migrant families.

Once my contacts assured me that my potential research participants were willing to talk to me, I started my interviews. The villages are between one and one-and-a-half kilometres apart from each other. I took a rickshaw\textsuperscript{10} van to go the villages Bagichapara and Harinmara. The minority (Hindu) village is in walking distance from Harvnaga village (where I stayed). I started my interviews with the left behind women from Bagichapara village first. Although, I was perceived as an outsider, my traditional Bengali attire and the fact that I am a relative to one of the villagers made it easy for my participants to engage in conversation with me. In many cases, there was more than one left behind woman in the same family. In such families, both mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are left behind women. In other families, two sisters-in- laws’ husbands are abroad. Once I ended the interview at one house, they even directed me to other houses where I could find more women who are in similar situation to them. While the

\textsuperscript{10} Rickshaw originally denotes a two or three-wheeled passenger cart
left-behind mother in laws (aged 33 to 38), and slightly older left behind wives (age between 19 to 25) were confident and open to talk beyond my interview questions, I found it rather challenging to make young left behind brides (aged 14-16) speak frankly. Young brides were generally shy in nature and often their mothers-in-laws’ urge to stay in the same room during the interview made the brides more nervous.

In general, approaching the left behind women for the interview was not difficult and they were not frightened to talk to me. Having such positive experience with the women, I assumed interviewing return male migrants would not be problematic either. However, I realized it was a mistaken assumption during my first attempted interview with a return migrant man in the Bagichapara village. He refused to be interviewed saying, he cannot trust me as government is not involved. At this point, I decided to contact the Member, who is the government representative for the four villages. I also took this opportunity to interview the Member as well. He promised to find me male return migrants who will be willing to be interviewed. However, my relative, by the time already had talked to few more return male migrants from the Hrainmara village and explained to them about my research. When the men gave their consent, I started interviewing the men.

I introduced myself to the participants and explained my research in an informal way. With women, it was easier as they felt free to ask me personal questions such as whether I am married, what is my profession etc. This indeed helped to develop bonding and trust between myself and my participants. These conversations took several minutes and I asked their permission to switch on my voice recorder before asking them relevant questions. Similarly, with men I explained my research informally and introduced myself to them. While the men did not ask me a lot of personal questions, they were more confident to share their experience. Many seemed to feel pride while explaining their exposure to a different country and culture.

As I interviewed more than one participant a day (maximum 3 participants a day), I took notes while interviewing. I did not carry my laptop while interviewing. Hence, upon return to my relative’s place after the interviews, I transferred the data to my encrypted laptop and edited my hand-written notes. Once I felt I had gathered enough data, I decided to leave Bogura at the beginning of November 2017.

5.3.1.1. A brief description of Bogura
Bogura district is a northern district of Bangladesh, under the Rajshahi division. The distance from the capital city Dhaka to Bogura district is 165 Kilometres. It takes around five hours by bus from Dhaka to Bogura. It takes another 40 minutes by taxi or car to go the villages in Kundogram Union where I conducted my interviews. While Bogura city itself is an industrial city where many small and mid-sized industries are situated, the villages I covered for my fieldwork are mainly agriculture based. Particularly the sub-district Adamdighi, in which my fieldwork villages are found, is well known for the fine quality of its rice. Bogura has a humid subtropical climate. The main income source in Bogura is still agriculture. The dialect spoken in Bogura is known as northern dialect of Bengali. The district of Bogura contains 3472 mosques, 686 temples, 37 churches and 58 tombs (Haq 2012). Folk culture especially folk song and folk talks are quite popular among the people of Bogura district.

5.3.1.2. A note on the past and the present of Bogura district

Bogura district inhabits a prominent place in the legendary and earliest historical archives of Bengal. Until the 1204 when Bakhtiyar Kjilji 11 led the Muslim conquest of Bengal, Bogura for an extensive period of time was under Hindu and Buddhist eastern Indian Kingdom such as: the Mauryas, the Guptas, Sasanka, the Palas and the Senas dynasties. The present Bogura district was first formed in 1821 during British rule. During the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, the area was enveloped in thick fighting in the Battle of Bogura between the allied troops of Mukti Bahini (Bangladeshi Freedom Fighter) and the Indian Army (combined) which defeated the Pakistani Army. In 2018, the Government of Bangladesh changed its spelling of the name of the district from Bogra to Bogura, as the pronunciation of Bogura is more accurate in Bengali.

5.3.1.3. My observation of the villages in Bogura

As mentioned earlier, the four villages where I conducted my interviews, are one to one-and-a-half kilometres apart from each other. Although these villages are adjacent, they have quite distinct characteristics. The physical infrastructure of these villages is broadly similar. Recently, the damaged roads have been renovated by the government, but the local routes which connect the villages are still muddy and the monsoon weather and frequent rain make it very difficult to commute. Even though I took a rickshaw van while commuting from one

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11 Bakhtiyar Kjilji, a member of Turkic tribe long settled in what is now Southern Afghanistan, was head of the military force that conquered parts of eastern India at the end of the 12th century.
village to another, there were times when the rickshaw puller simply could not move his vehicle because of heavy mud and rain, and I had to get off the van to walk to my participants’ houses.

It is interesting to note that even the village Harinamra, which seems developed compared to the other three villages (because of more successful/wealthy migrant households) has severely damaged roads. During my field work, two men from this village assumed I had a connection with the government, and came to me to request if I could convey their message regarding road construction to a higher authority of the government. Typically, the housing layout does not follow any strict pattern; houses and ponds are scattered throughout the village. Villagers prefer to build houses close to their other family members’ houses. It is usual to find two or three brothers’ houses next to each other. This is also due to the fact that family members own lands and properties in the same area. As the villages do not have proper roads, there is no organized layout of houses on both sides of the road. Houses are surrounded by extensive paddy fields, other lands and ponds.

Below I present some photos of the villages (taken by me during the fieldwork) to provide a better understanding of the field sites. All the images of the villages and households used in this chapter, and in chapter six and seven, are taken by myself during the fieldwork between September 2017 to October 2017.

**Image 5.1: Outside road of the villages**

![Image 5.1](image5_1.png)

The road in the above picture (Image 5.1) connects the villages to the Union Kundogram and market area.
Image 5.2: Local road of the village Bagichapa

Image 5.3: Harvanga Village

Image 5.3 shows ponds are scattered in the villages and houses are not built following any organized lay-out.
**Bagichapara Village:** This village has approximately 80 households. The villagers are all Muslims. It has a mosque and adjacent maktab\(^\text{12}\). The village has both economically successful and unsuccessful migrant households. Most of the dwellings are non-brick, mud houses. The village has only two newly built brick houses, built by two return migrant men. The village does not have any schools, and the closest government primary school is in Harinmara village. Interview participants from these village did not seem regretful or desperate in their current life status. Although, the villagers here are not as well-off as Harinmara’s residents, they are also not as poor as the residents of Harvanga and Bhebrapara villages.

**Harvanga Village:** This village has approximately 60 households and the villagers are all Muslims. Among the three Muslim Villages, Harvanga has most economically unsuccessful migrant households. It has a mosque and adjacent maktab and no schools. The majority of the houses are of non-brick, mud construction and there is only one brick house, newly built by a migrant man. The majority of migrant families are relatively frustrated and desperately waiting

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\(^{12}\) Maktab is generally a religious school adjacent to the mosque, where young children learn how to read Quraan and other Islamic values. It is more informal, unlike Madrassas.
to improve their financial status. One apparent reason behind this disparity is that men from this village started going abroad later than the men from the other two Muslim villages.

**Harinmara Village:** This has approximately 100 households and the village with the most economically successful migrant households. The villagers are all Muslims. This village is also known as the village of migrant men (probashider gram), as most of the adult men are abroad. Many migrant houses are newly built, brick made. The families showcase their new wealth through fancy furniture and tile-fitted toilets. The village also has a government primary school, mosque and maqtab. Migrant families are relatively satisfied with their lives. This is the only village where some of the left behind wives mention that when their husbands visit, they go to a recreation center and shop in the town. Women from other villages say that they only go to visit their parents’ or relatives’ house as a form of entertainment or short trip.

**Bhebrapa Village:** This is the village where the minority Hindu people live. The village has approximately 25 households. Among the four villages, this village is poorest. All the houses are mud or non-brick houses. It has poor hygiene and no proper sidewalks, let alone roads. Only two men from this village are working abroad, which seems to explain the lack of development in this village. Also, the two men have only recently been abroad, for less than a year. As all the villagers are Hindus in this village, it does not have a mosque, but neither does it have a temple. The villagers pray at home and they have a small statue of a Hindu goddess inside their houses. The majority of the non-migrant men work in the fields as farmers, and women stay home like their Muslim counterparts. However, they voted for a Hindu woman, who is now a Member and represents this community to higher government authority. During the interviews, the participants from this village reported that as minorities, they do not face any social problems or threats. They note that their neighbouring Muslim villagers are respectful towards them. One of the women says:

> We sometimes see on the news or hear that in some places, Muslims attack Hindu people, or break the statue of the Hindu Goddess. But here, things like that do not happen. We are living here quite peacefully.

In terms of everyday life, there are no remarkable differences between Hindus and Muslims in these villages. Hindu women wear the same clothes *Sari* and *Salwar kamij*. The only difference is they do not wear *Burka* or *Hijab*. The two photos below are from the Hindu village.
Image 5.5: *Bhebrapara* (Hindu Village): A slippery and muddy path to the houses.

Image 5.6: *Bhebrapara* Village: Hindu migrant household.
**Image 5.6** shows the poor condition of a Hindu migrant household. The above picture is of Angina front yard. It is severely muddy due to the rain.

### 5.3.1.4. Villagers’ Occupations

During my stay in the village Harvanga, I observed both migrant and non-migrant households in the four villages. It is apparent from my interviews and participant observation that men from these villages mostly work on the land in agriculture and those who are not working in the fields, are labour migrants abroad. In addition to these two roles, Islamic professions such as Imams or simply a teacher in the madrassa (Islamic religious school) are popular among the men. A few men run local businesses such as small shops or grocery stores in close by market areas. Successful return male migrants invest their money in land purchases, building new houses, or sometimes in new businesses such as poultry farms and fisheries.

Women from both migrant and non-migrant households are generally not involved in any income generating activities. There are a few exceptional cases, where village women are involved in tailoring but only serve other female customers or female neighbours. Another exceptional case is during the cropping or harvest season, when women help washing and drying rice and other crops. Women in Bogura district in general do not work in the field or agriculture. During an interview, a migrant man mentions that in his village Harinmara, two women completed their studies and moved to the town Bogura to work as government officials. He emphasises that this is rare; the norm is that girls get married early, become housewives and quit education.

The female NGO worker from Harvanga village is one exceptional case. When I asked her how she feels about being a working woman in a village where women do not work outside of home. She says:

> I cannot say bad things about my villagers or village, right? To be honest, I am busy with my life. I stay home only on weekends and I hardly meet my neighbours.

The female NGO worker leads a different life compared to other village women. She was not forthcoming about her experience as a working woman living in a village. She believes that talking about any problems she faces in the village would give her village a bad name and could potentially be problematic for her daily life. She wears *Burkha* everyday while going out - like other Muslim women or housewives who wear Burkha when going out leaving the village occasionally.
5.3.1.5. Who is the villagers’ first point of contact: government’s representative/Member, police, NGO workers or religious leaders?

When I questioned a man (a 35-year-old farmer from Harvanga village) who he would contact if he faced any problem, he replied saying it would depend on the nature of the issue. For example, a religious leader cannot solve a problem that requires police involvement. If there is any dispute in everyday life that requires Islamic teaching to resolve, such as divorce, or requires Islamic solutions to mitigate issues between husbands and wives, the villagers go to the Imams. However, the neighbours play the most important roles in mitigating issues between spouses, or any other family dispute. Neighbours are often called upon, but most of the time neighbours just show up and intervene when they hear family, or a couple seriously arguing next door. If neighbours are unable to solve the problem, the Member (local politician/Government representative) is called upon. If it is a serious crime such as murder or a fight between men, the villagers seek help from the police.

One of the local non-migrant men explains:

We do not get enough help either from the Government or from the NGOs. We do not go to NGOs for help or for money, because local Islamic leaders have mentioned NGOs are run by the Jews and we should not ask for help and money from them.

This statement shows that the Islamist leaders (if not the village Imams) have a strong influence on the beliefs of villagers. However, when I interviewed the female NGO worker, she reported that many families from the villages are on loans programmes run by the NGOs. And the donors of the NGOs are mostly Western development organizations such as UKaid, UNDP etc. Most of these loans are provided to women and they hand over the money to the husbands for their agricultural roles or even for their husband’s migration. The NGO worker notes that if the villagers need a substantial amount of money either for migration or for buying land, taking the loans provided by the NGO-run banks is often the only option. Government can rarely help villagers in such matters, according to her. Yet the majority of my interview participants said that the men manged the money for migration by having their lands on lease and borrowing money from wealthy relatives or locals.

It appears from the interview with the Member and from my participant observation that the Member prioritises community work such as repairing roads and facilitating small Government
projects like making a playground in primary schools and 80 days work activity for villagers. The Member is also involved in personal issues of the villagers when they cannot solve the issue by themselves. In cases of serious disputes among villagers, the Member is called upon and involved. And the Member indicated that NGOs are not involved in tackling such social issues. There seems to be apparent distrust between the NGOs and the Government. Furthermore, neither the Government nor the NGOs provide any agenda to support migrant men’s left behind families.

Although the local governmental representative Member is a follower of the ruling Government party Awami-league, support for the Islamist political group Jamat-i-islam is not unnoticeable among the locals from the three Muslim villages. One middle aged woman from a non-migrant household states passionately that the ruling Government Awami-league is the ‘enemy of Islam’ (Islam er shotru) and is not doing enough to protect Islam. This statement echoes the major concern that keeps the ruling Awami-league Party consistently under pressure, a point I discussed in the previous chapter on Islam and Bangladesh. The Awami-league claims that the opposition political party BNP with Jamat-i-islam ties, has long been wrongfully branding the Awami-league as an ‘anti-Islamic’ party.

Next, I discuss the sub-urban field site Munshiganj.

5.3.2. A brief description of Munshiganj

Munshiganj is a central district of Bangladesh, in the Dhaka division. The distance between the capital city of Dhaka and Munshiganj is 55 kilometres. It takes a little more than an hour (due to traffic) by car from Dhaka to Munshiganj. Munshiganj Sadar has 12 Unions/Wards, 129 Mauzas/Mahallas, and 219 villages. There is a lack of records and not enough data on Munshiganj’s climate, religion, industry and local language. The available data on the population of Munshiganj from the website named Banglapedia suggests, according to the government census 2015: a Muslim population of 1,181,012, Hindu 110,804, Buddhist 1,922, Christian 103 and others 308. The website also details main sources of income in Munshiganj: agriculture 38.64%, non-agricultural labourer 3.17%, industry 1.69%, commerce 23.17%, transport and communication 3.75%, service 10.87%, construction 2.27%, religious service 0.19%, rent and remittance 5.95% and others 10.30%. A cultural survey report (2007) on Munshiganj district suggests the district is also famous for folk literature such as local folk songs and folk poetry.
5.3.2.1. A note on the past and the present of Munshiganj

During the Mughal empire the present Munshiganj town was known as *Idrakpur* which was named after the then Mughal faujdar *Idrak*. A village on the outskirts of Munshiganj town is still known as *Idrakpur*. During the British empire, *Idrakpur* was renamed as Munshiganj after the name of Munshi Enayet Ali, the local zamindar\(^{13}\) and inhabitant of the village Kazi Kasba in Rampal. Some notable revolutionary nationalists from Munshiganj are: Binoy Basu (1908-1930) revolutionary against British India, Dinesh Gupta (1911-1931) revolutionary against British India, M. Hamidullah Khan (1938-2011) Sector Commander of the Bangladesh force during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. Munshiganj is also known as *Bikrampur*. According to the 1991 Bangladesh census, Munshiganj district was established in 1984 (Ghosh 2012).

5.3.2.2. Gaining Access to Munshiganj

Upon return to Dhaka from my fieldwork in Bogura, I began preparations to conduct interviews in the Munshiganj district. The aim behind this decision was that the inclusion of left-behind women’s and return migrant men’s experiences from a different location would provide contrasting and comparative data to extend and develop my analysis. This proved to be justified. Contrary to my fieldwork experience from the villages of Bogura district, I did not have access to visit each left-behind women’s house in Munshiganj Sadar. Therefore, I utilized my connection with a government official from BSCIC (Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industrial Corporation). Saiful Islam, the Deputy Manager of BSCIC Munshiganj’s branch, helped me to find my research participants. The participants were called upon at the office building of BSCIC in Munshiganj, where I was provided a room to conduct my interviews with the participants one by one. BSCIC provides small loans to sub-urban and rural small cottage industries as well as to individuals. All the women from Munshiganj I interviewed explained that they had been beneficiaries of BSCIC loans. They spent the loans on house refurbishment and on other household expenses. Only three women mentioned they invested the loan in businesses such as tailoring. All the women said that they pay back the loans with the money sent by their migrant husbands.

5.3.2.3. My observation of Munshiganj:

\(^{13}\) Zamindar referred to landowner in colonial India, especially one who leased his land to tenant farmers.
As I did not have physical access to the participants’ households in the Munshiganj Sadar area I do not have the same broad details of the locality as I have from my field experience in the villages of Bogura district. My observation mostly includes the side notes I made during the interviews with the participants from Munshiganj at BSCIC office. Most of the female interviewees described how they were able to take loans from the BSCIC through their or their husband’s personal contacts. They know someone who works in BSCIC who helped them to get loans. This indicates that people who do not have such links and people who are in greater poverty may not have access to such support. One major difference between the Munshiganj Sadar and the villages in Bogura is the educational status of the research participants. More men from Munshiganj completed their education at a college level compared to men from villages in Bogura. More women in Munshiganj are educated than the village women in Bogura. The differences between the rural and sub-urban localities play a crucial role here. I examine such nuanced comparisons in the analysis chapters from five to eight.

5.4. Notes on Gatekeepers

The role of gatekeepers requires further discussion as it is a crucial part of the research process. Gatekeepers are those who provide directly or indirectly access to key resources needed to do research, be those resources logistical, human, institutional, or informational (Campbell et al. 2006). As mentioned above already my personal and professional network proved to be a great support regarding my access to the research locations. Both of my contacts helped to explain the purpose of my fieldwork to my research participants, and as a result my research participants accepted me or my role as a researcher without hesitation. Research (Stevens 2001; Myres 2001) shows having friendly contacts in the field helps researchers collect local data and define problems more accurately. A support system or friendly contacts for a lone female researcher is even more important in certain context or circumstances. Thambiah et al. (2016) note, their female research team (on a project researching Bangladeshi migrant women’s experience) experienced multiple incidents of male gatekeeper violence in the field. If I did not have the support of my personal and professional network/gatekeepers, I may have ended up with similar experiences to those noted by Thambiah et al. (2016). They could have severely impacted or even delayed my fieldwork.

Moreover, gatekeepers who hold power over the researcher or research participants can shape the research design and ultimately research data. I have mentioned earlier, my research participants felt no pressure and shared their life experience as they see it. One such example
is, to impress me, my participants could say they want their daughters to be educated like myself. But they emphasized that village tradition such as early marriage is more important than education for girls and they emphasised educated person like myself can disagree with their views. Likewise, participants from sub-urban Munshiganj shared their life experience not with an aim to impress me but to convey the reality of everyday lives.

I had complete autonomy during the data collection, both at the villages and sub-urban area, regardless the gatekeepers’ social background and their relation to the participants.

5.5. Data Analysis

Qualitative research focuses on the comprehensive knowledge and experience of the world which belongs to the participants/interviewees being researched. It aims not to impose predetermined concepts; rather, theory is elaborated during the research, as meanings are derived inductively from the data (Wilmot 2005, 1). This thesis uses an inductive strategy in the sense that theory is developed in the research process, not presented as a set of propositions to be tested. This approach is often referred to as ‘grounded theory’ (Stanley and Wise 1990, 22). The aim of an inductive research strategy is to establish limited generalizations about the distribution of, and patterns of association amongst, observed or measured characteristics of individuals and social phenomena (Blaikie 2009, 83).

Thematic analysis is one of the most common approaches to qualitative data analysis (Bryman 2012, 578). Themes or codes are consistent phrases, expressions, or ideas that are common among research participants (Kvale 2007). Coding is not what happens before analysis but constitutes an important part of the analysis (Weston et al. 2001). I analysed my data based on three sub research questions and presented the data accordingly. For example, my first sub research question explores how the left-behind wives’ relationship with their extended family affect their physical mobility and decision-making power. Hence, I particularly looked at the ‘relationship with in-laws’, which ultimately created new themes and sub themes. For example, under the category of patriarchal norms, left-behind wives’ life cycle, restrictions on their physical mobility and the concept of ‘good women’ ‘vodro mohila’ are formed. The practice of Burkha and daily phone conversation with migrant husbands also directly affect the wives’ physical and economic autonomy. These topics are analysed under the first research question in chapters five and six. My second sub research question explores wives’ vulnerability to gender-based violence and the experiences of young brides. To address this question, I highlighted women’s experience of physical and mental trauma and themes such as abusive
marriage, fear of gossip etc. as expressed in the interviews and as well as field notes from the participant observations. Young brides’ accounts of their marriages to migrant men created several sub-themes such as young bride’s educational status, different attitudes towards education between Madrassa and school going brides, and the link between men’s migration and teen marriage. These are analysed in chapter seven. Similarly, to address my third sub research question on migrant men’s attitude towards gender norms, I focused on the parts of interviews where the men shared their views on female ‘modesty’, their expectations towards their wives and daughters, and any opportunities these migrants had to observe gender relations in their host countries. Several interesting themes and sub-themes are formed in this section. One such theme is migrant men’s admiration towards their host country, Saudi Arabia. Related to this theme, return migrants’ support for the Saudi version of Islam and Purdah for women are analysed. I also explored migration-induced masculine identities for the return migrants.

5.5.1. A note on translation

All the interviews were conducted in Bengali, the only language my research participants speak. The participants from Bogura district speak a northern Bengali dialect. However, it did not create any problem, as I am familiar with this dialect since my parents are originally from Bogura, and I have strong ties with my relatives who live in Bogura. Also, the dialect is not much different from the general Bengali spoken throughout Bangladesh. I tried to keep the language of the research participants as far as possible, which often made the analysis process an iterative one. I started the transcription and translation of the interviews by myself upon return to the UK. I preferred to do it by myself, as I can understand the tone, language of my participants and recall the experiences and settings along with the field notes I have taken, to identify themes. This would not have been possible if someone else had done the transcription and translations. This was also part of the reason why I decided not to use computer-assisted data analysis through programmes like NVivo. My field notes combined with the transcriptions kept the images of my participants very much alive, and I kept the real names of the participants during the data analysis process. All names are changed (except the BSCIC official’s name) in the final draft of the thesis and in other research outputs to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

5.6. Ethics and Positionality
In this segment I locate the issues of ethics and power in the research process and how I addressed them. I followed the ethics guidelines of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth (ASA 2011) for my Ethical application. I also maintained the core codes of ethics which are broadly used in social sciences: voluntary participation of interviewees, protecting the interests of the research participants and research with integrity (Blaikie 2009, 31). Ethical issues in relation to conducting research are mainly focused on power relations, informed consent and confidentiality; and these issues are not only unique to young vulnerable participants but also to adults (Kirk 2007, 1252).

The power relation between the researcher and those researched is an important ethical consideration in qualitative research. According to Reinharz (1992, 261) many feminist researchers argue that studies of women in a country should be done by women of that country; ‘an author is an authority insofar as she is also the subject about which she speaks’. As a Bangladeshi woman myself studying other Bangladeshi women there is a level of comfort (e.g. speaking in Bengali and knowing the local customs and culture), but it does not automatically provide me insider status. My status as an urban, middle-class woman with experience of living and studying abroad, puts me in an outsider box to the villagers, even though I have personal contacts (relatives) in one of the villages. The villagers perceived me as an upper-class Bangladeshi who stays in the UK. I recognized this identity and was not tempted to claim that participant observation would somehow convert me into one of the villagers. I was more of an outsider than an insider to the participants in both the rural and suburban contexts. My acknowledgement of participants’ perceptions of my identity increased trust, allowing me to attempt to decrease the degree of unfamiliarity between us. This approach towards recognizing a researcher’s own self to reduce biases in the field, was claimed earlier by Fauzia Ahmed (2014) in her research on a Bangladeshi village. Also, identifying myself as too similar to my research participants could have created the problem of ‘over rapport’ (Perriton, 2000). There are no expectations of the researcher and the researched to be a homogenous group (Rubin and Rubin 2011). I simply utilised my connections with the locality, my facility in Bengali language and traditional Bangladeshi attire to build rapport with my participants.

Following Luff (1999), Nazneen and Sultan (2014) have indicated that current discussion on methodologies and empowerment research needs to move beyond the usual reflexive practices and positionality and also focus on how the research processes can be made less traumatic for the researcher where the researcher engages with non-feminist groups with strong views
against women’s equality. This view reflects part of my experience in the villages, where the participants share very conservative attitudes towards women’s public and private roles.

5.7. Limitations

Discussing the limitations of interviewing as a research method, Ryan and Bernard (2000, 217) argue that ‘people are inaccurate reporters of their own behaviour’. There are many reasons for this: ‘exaggerations and errors can be due to memory lapses, a desire to make a good impression on the interviewer, or to emphasise one’s perception of something rather than providing a factual narration’ (Guha 2017, 146). There is a need therefore, to be aware of how narratives of events can differ from the actual events, and of why a respondent might choose to alter the narrative in a particular way (Guha 2017). As mentioned earlier, a key challenge I faced while interviewing young brides was the urge of their mothers-in-law to stay in the same room to guard the brides while they were talking to me. I gently requested them to leave the room explaining I only want to talk to the bride/daughter-in-law. While some mothers-in-law listened and left the room, others decided to stay. Inevitably, this may have affected the way the young brides shared a version of their daily lives. It also revealed the nature of their relationships with mothers-in-law and the control the older women exercise over young women in the villages.

Another key challenge I faced was during the interviews with male participants. My third research question which investigates changes in men’s attitudes towards gender norms, requires investigation of the gendered division of labour in the migrant households where the migrant men had returned or were present (on leave). For example, I discussed in the literature review in chapter two that studies on Mexican migrant men suggest that migrants continue cooking and cleaning (skills they learned in their bachelor lifestyle abroad) even after they return to their home country (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1992). I could not ask my male participants directly whether they continue such activities upon return to the country. One reason was that Bangladeshi men in general are not involved in housekeeping activities, hence asking such a question would have sounded inappropriate. The men could potentially feel insulted if the answer is no. Asking questions related to such gendered division of labour directly, could also indicate a disrespect towards local culture on my part and indicate a tendency to posit the ‘other’ or non-traditional roles (e.g. men helping in kitchen) as ‘superior’ culture. May (2004, 183) argues that reflexive research practice entails ‘an understanding of the social conditions of social scientific knowledge production’. Hence, I asked my participants indirect questions
related to their daily routine. Also, participant observation enabled me to record data without asking certain direct questions.

Conclusion

I have explained in this chapter that my research is inspired by feminist frameworks of discourse and reflexivity, which prioritise listening to those being researched. By doing so, I highlighted the need to conduct qualitative research on left-behind women in Bangladesh. This chapter has clarified my research design, research process, methodology and methods, recognising the problems I faced and how I addressed them. I have tried to identify my researcher self in the research process and attempted to recognise how it may have influenced the method of knowledge formation.

I have also detailed in this chapter my personal involvement in gaining insights in issues of access, and challenges faced during field work. I believe my social contacts, personal account and having used Bengali language when talking to my research participants made it easier for me to conduct this research. I emphasise that my social networks (my relatives in Bogura and professional contact in Munshiganj) were very helpful in gaining access with my research participants, which also signposts the importance of building and retaining social networks in the Bangladesh context.

Finally, a qualitative approach to studying the everyday life of the participants and an ethnographic approach with participant observation and interviews were identified as most suitable to meet the needs of the research. The selection and description of the field sites show how this research captures the heterogeneity of the lives of left-behind wives in Bangladesh.
Chapter 6: Changes in the Family Structure: Impact of Men’s Migration on Kinship Culture and Changes in Women’s Status

Introduction

Family structure or household is the primary entity that goes through changes when a member from it migrates abroad. Drawing from my fieldwork data, in this chapter, I analyse the changes in living arrangement in the context of men’s migration, to detail the consequent changes in left-behind-women’s life. I focus on four major themes related to kinship structure to examine how they affect women’s status.

First, I provide a snapshot of the individual living arrangement. For example, the patrilocal setting, and how it changes in the sub-urban context and remains unchanged in the village context. Second, I detail the real-life consequences for women in the absence of men, such as: women’s dependency on other non-migrant males of the family. The last two themes that I focus on are cultural practices related to kinship system, such as: consanguineous marriage and son preference. I detail how these two traditional practices intertwine with men’s migration in order to locate changes in women’s position in the family and in boarder community. I argue, despite the regional differences (e.g. sub-urban women’s greater influential status compared to village women’s), the village left-behind wives too, often challenge the local customs in their own way to advance their position in the family. Migrant men from the villages uphold greater conservative values and maintain rigid masculinity, whereas sub-urban migrant men maintain lesser conservative values. Overall, this chapter provides a detailed picture of the kinship system, women’s status, and family relations in the context of men’s migration.

6.1. Changes in the Patrilocal Residency

The culture of Bangladesh, similar to most of South Asia is largely gender stratified, characterized by patrilineal descent, patrilocal residence, inheritances and succession practices that exclude women and hierarchical relations in which the patriarch or his relatives have authority over family members (Gardner 2006; Jejeebhoy & Sathar 2001). In such patriarchal-patrilocal context, powerful norms about female respectability serve to constrain women’s ability to dispose of their own labour, channelling it into those areas of the labour and commodity market, which are considered most compatible with their seclusion within the precincts of the household (Kabeer 1996, 16). Ranges and structures of freedom for women
vary within region. In Bangladesh urban-rural setting, class, level of education and structure of family largely affect women’s freedom of movement and decision-making power. Husbands’ absence due to migration may or may not affect women’s autonomy considerably. Depending on whether the migrants’ wives stay with their parents or with their in-laws, largely affects wives’ mobility.

My research participants who are teen brides (age 14, 15) from the villages under Bogura district, prefer to stay with their parents, instead of staying at in-laws’ when husbands are abroad. 19-year-old Jannati from Harinmara village said she was given in marriage at the age of 13, and her husband went abroad after three years of their marriage. In the initial years, she stayed at her parents and was never forced to stay with the husband and in-laws. Only when she started to feel comfortable did she begin staying with husband and in-laws. However, exception exists. 15-year-old bride Sauda from Bagichapara village said she wanted to stay with her mother-in-law right after the marriage, because both Sauda’s husband and father-in-law are abroad. Sauda (15) wants to take care of her mother-in-law and wants to learn the skills of a good housewife. Here also, staying with the mother-in-law seems Sauda’s deliberate decision, and it is not forced upon her. The point to be noted here is, Sauda used to be a madrassa going student before her marriage. I analyse madrassa going teen brides’ attitudes towards marriage and education in chapter seven.

Similarly, in the sub-urban Munshiganj, more left behind wives are staying at their parents’ house or close to it, instead of staying at in-laws’. Both 30-year-old Jhorna and 37-year-old Nasima whose husbands are migrants, had their teenage daughters married with other migrant men. Both Jhorna and Nasima’s married daughters stay with the mothers. Similar to the young brides of the villages. However, unique to sub-urban Munsganij area, matured left behind wives also prefer to stay close to their parents’ house. Nasima’s parents-in-laws are dead, but even when they were alive Nasima did not have a good relationship with them. She stays next door of her parents’ house in Munshiganj with her married daughter and unmarried son. Jhorna’s in-laws live far, close to the capital city. But Jhorna stays next door to her parents’ house in Munshiganj with her married daughter.

Therefore, the culture of patrilocal residence where married couple resides with or close to the husband’s parents, particularly in sub-urban Munshiganj is considerably changing due to men’s migration. In sub-urban area both young and matured left behind wives are staying close to their parents’ house instead of staying at in-laws’ or close to the in-laws’. Whereas, in the
villages early teenaged brides stay at parents’ until they become accustomed to the in-laws and husbands. For the matured village wives, residing next door to parents’ house is not as common as it is for the left behind women in sub-urban area.

Now the question is, does staying close to parents’ house facilitate women’s mobility and decision-making power? For sub-urban women like Jhorna (30) and Nasima (37), because they are already in a slightly better position (due to their age and sub-urban context) compared to the village left behind wives, they can decide to stay close to their parents’ house. With age and after childbearing women’s autonomy and self-esteem generally increase (Agarwal 1997; Kabeer 1996). Therefore, it is more likely that they stay next door to parents’ house because they already own a powerful status in the husband’s family, and it is not that staying close to their parents’ house provided them that authority. Even though, the village left behind wives also gain a powerful status at in-laws’ house with age, they do not necessarily stay close to their parents’ house, rather they reside with or close to in-laws. Thus, the changes in patrilocal settings remain unique to sub-urban context.

Both sub-urban wives Jhorna (30) and Nasima (37) use the active voice ‘I got my daughter married’. This indicates their decision-making power in the family, and which is considerably absent among the same age left behind wives from the villages. Jhorna (30) even mentions she and her husband decided it together that her husband should migrate to make money for the family. This indicates her equal part in the decision-making process of her husband’s migration. On the other hand, 40-year-old left behind wife Marzan from Harvanga village is not confident enough to say she got her daughter married. Marzan (40) lives in the same house with her elderly mother-in-law. When I asked whose decision, it was to get her 16-year-old daughter married, she replied her migrant husband decided it. This regional differences in women’s autonomy can be referred to Jejeebhoy and Sathar’s (2001) research, as they found Indian and Pakistani women who reside with in-laws have less decision-making power. However, Marzan (40) being a middle age wife and her mother-in-law being an elderly dependant, her in-law is not a dominant character here. Yet, the village wife Marzan (40) lacks confident and decision-making power. Below are the statements of two sub-urban wives that indicate their confidence.

Sub-urban Nasima (37) says:

All the lands my husband bought, he bought it on my name. All his bank accounts are on my name. He loves me a lot. He trusts me a lot. I choose this family, where my daughter is married now. My husband said: ‘whatever you feel is the best,
just do it. I know you will not do anything, which is not good for my family’. Then, I
got my daughter married. Her father did not even see his son-in-law. He (husband) said:
“you decided; I am happy with it.’’ Tumi ja bujho, tai koro.

50-year-old sub-urban wife Kolpona says:

I made sure that my son and daughter did their best in study. I gave
importance on their age and time. Money will come and go, but if they don’t study
during due time, that time will not come again. My husband says to me that ‘‘because
of you my children are educated today, I was abroad. You did it all by yourself’’. My
children got scholarships both on 5th and 8th grade.

Only sub-urban left behind wives mention about such words of encouragement by their migrant
husbands. Left behind wives from the villages do not share similar experience or are too shy to
share, assuming it would publicise the relationship of husband and wife which is supposed to
be private and not something to talk to an outsider like myself. One particular observation
should be noted here, most of my participants (both women and men) from the villages are shy
or uncomfortable to address their spouses as ‘my husband and my wife’; rather, they use
Bengali pronouns such as ‘shae’, ‘a’, ‘oi’, in English means ‘he or she’. Another usual form of
address to spouses is ‘soler bap’ or ‘bacchar ma’ means ‘father of my child or mother of my
child’. This is due to the fact that villagers are shy to address their spouses as ‘‘my wife or my
husband’’ because they think this form of address is sensual and private, hence, not to mention
publicly. In Indian villages a woman will go to great lengths to avoid saying her husband’s
name Instead, she will use a pronoun or ‘father of my child’; while many men also reciprocate
the tradition by not calling their wives by their names, they face far lesser censure (Kalyanwala
2017). This village custom in India indicates that a woman respects her husband and wants him
to live a long life; a woman who doesn’t follow it will be seen as cunning, a woman with no
morals (Kalyanwala 2017).

However, such Indian village customs are not the reason behind Bangladeshi Muslim villagers
not addressing their spouses publicly, rather it is simply a matter of reserve or deference. For
my research participants, it is more about a private conjugal matter, and thus, reluctant to
mention to an outsider. However, few men and women from the villages and sub-urban
Munshiganj address their spouses in English as ‘‘Amar (my) Husband or Wife’’ during the
interview, instead of saying the Bengali words ‘shami’ and ‘bou’ for ‘husband’ and ‘wife’.
This indicates, they feel less shy or uncomfortable to address their spouses in a foreign
language/term in public sphere. The men from the villages and sub-urban area, who use ‘’amar wife’’ are the ones who have already spent a lot of time abroad and fairly confident about themselves. And the only few young left-behind wives who studied till age 18th or above address their husbands as ‘amar husband’ during the interview. This indicates, with age, education and abroad experience (for men only) villagers are more confident to talk about their married life. Whereas young participants with limited education and little or no abroad experience (mostly women) are shy to do so.

In the light of this context, it would be wrong to claim that village wives do not receive words of encouragement from their migrant husbands; or they are not as satisfied as sub-urban left-behind wives are with their husbands. As discussed above by nature village women are shy to talk about how their husbands treat them. Trawick (1992) found in South India that romantic love is expected to grow within a marriage, not talked about explicitly, but expressed in everyday acts like women cooking and maintaining a clean house or material provision and sacrifice by men. Thus, the village wives have a tendency not to disclose their private relationship with their husbands, to others. Also, they believe by performing their daily housework (e.g. cooking, and taking care of children and in-laws) while their husbands are working hard abroad to make money for the family, they are sustaining healthy marriage as couple. The ideals of companionship and romantic love promoted by the popular media are compromised by the need to fulfil social and familial responsibilities (Gardner 1995, 162-163).

The village wives believe this view on their marriage should be recognized by others (outsider but a Bengali like myself).

Hence, for the village wives their husbands’ love and commitment towards them are shown in ordinary daily activities such as phone calls from abroad every day; or in serious matters such as when the migrant husband facilitates son’s migration, sends money home etc. However, one exception among the village wives is 37-year-old Salima. During the interview she speaks highly of her husband. In her words:

My father sent (financially contributed) my husband to Iraq. My father’s side of the family is rich. They are richest in the village. Poor luck you know! I was supposed to go to America. That’s why my father got me married with this guy! My husband won DV lottery\textsuperscript{14} but some distance relatives from the US, they made false complain against my husband and we could not go to the US. Initially after marriage, I

\textsuperscript{14} DV Lottery = Diversity immigrant visa/green card lottery in the United States.
suffered a lot because I come from a well-off family and my in-laws are poor. I had to
starve here; it was hard! But now, I am happy. My husband is a good-hearted man. Even
if I waste or spend a lot of money, he will not say anything to me. He is a good man
and I am happy.

Salima (37) is an exception due to her background, her father’s well-off status compared to her
in-laws which may have provided her a powerful status at in-laws’ and subsequently better
treatment by her husband. She mentions her father-in-law was already dead before her marriage
and mother-in-law died few years after her marriage. However, she does not stay too close her
parents’ house, unlike sub-urban wives, rather she stays at her husband’s house with brother
in-laws and their wives. Which indicates no changes in the patriloclal settings in the village
context. She is involved in financial matters such as dealing with land leases and meeting land
buyers on behalf of her migrant husband. Again, her background such as absence of in-laws,
her well off parents play a key role in her being involved in finance management. However,
she still cannot avoid the negativity that arises from her being an influential woman in the
family. According to her, neighbours and some close relative speak badly of her for being
engaged in the matters that should be done by men.

35-year-old Jahanara from the same village Bagichapara, shares similar background as Salima
(37). Jahanara’s (35) parents financed her husband’s migration and her parents are
comparatively well off than her in-laws. Jahanara’s mother in-law is dead. Jahanara (35) lives
in the same house with her elderly father-in-law, brother in law and his family. However, unlike
Salima (37), Jahanara (35) is not involved in any finance management or decision-making
process. Even though Jahanara’s parents financed her husband’s migration, Jahanara has no
say in important decisions. As my conversation with her follows:

MK: Do you take any decisions by yourself? For example: buying or
managing lands; or on other personal matters?

Jahanara: I have my father-in-law. And I always have to ask my husband. Only
then, I can make any decision. Or else, can I do it? I am a woman. Ami meye manush,
ami ki jani. They (husband and father-in-law) will provide or deal with money. So, it
should be their decision. I cannot do anything alone.

Since Jahanara (35) is not involved any major financial decision-making process or she does
not have to deal with men outside of her family, she does not invite bad comments from
neighbour or community, unlike Salima (37). This reinforces the idea that in rural settings women’s involvement in men’s public sphere is still not socially accepted. Men’s migration seems to bring no changes in that matter. As Sylvia Chant (1992, 105) mentions:

While in most countries where movement out of certain regions is heavily male selective, some advances in autonomy for women arise from the temporary or long-term absence of men from domestic space; at the same time, limited access to means of survival in source areas means that the women left behind are often vulnerable and unable to achieve major personal gains in material wellbeing.

This is also relatable to the left behind wives in Bangladesh. Almost all of my female participants said their personal wellbeing is all about their children’s wellbeing. The wives do not desire for their independent wellbeing, or income which ultimately seen as a threat in existing social structure and could make them more vulnerable. As Jahanara (35), from Bagichapara village says:

Haha! What about my personal wellbeing! If my son is happy, I am happy. I am getting old now. What else do I need?

Salima (37) from the same village says:

Yes, I used to miss him (husband) a lot during first year of his migration! But slowly it gets better. I am busy with my children. He went abroad to make money for us. So, that we can live happy. You have to compromise somewhere, right? You cannot be perfect or happy in all aspects of life!

27-year-old Rupali from sub-urban Munshiganj shares similar feeling towards her husband’s absence. She says:

I used to get upset because I have to do the works (shop for grocery, taking children to school) he would do if he was around. But there is nothing we can do. He is sacrificing for us (her and children). If I cannot sacrifice a little, this is not life then. He is far away from family. I can easily go to my sister’s house, my parent’s house. But he cannot see anyone, even he wishes to. That is why I think compared to his, my problem is nothing.

Migrants’ wives from both sub-urban and villages, do not perceive their personal well-being as something independent or separate from the wellbeing of the family as a whole. And family’s
wellbeing referred to children’s wellbeing, being able to eat well, building new house and not depending on financial help from wealthy relatives. Above statements show, the wives believe they must fulfil their duties of good mother and good wives, while husbands are sacrificing the comfort of homely love and environment for the sake of a better or financially stable future. Kabeer (1996) mentions on gender dimensions of poverty that women are generally poorer than men because they lack the range of endowments and exchange entitlements which male members of their households tend to enjoy. Women are less able than men to translate labour into income, income into choice and choice into personal well-being (Kabeer 1996, 19). My data show, men’s migration does not challenge the existing view on women’s personal well-being in Bangladesh, rather reinforces it. Men’s migration does not challenge wives’ dependency on husbands, rather in the village context it encourages left behinds to depend on other non-migrants males of the family. This is discussed next.

6.2. Women’s Dependency on Non-migrant Male Family Members

Where changes in patrilocal settings remain unique to sub-urban migrant households, left-behind women’s dependency on other male members of the family is more of a norm in the villages. Previous research shows, rural Bangladeshi women generally have no direct control over the means of production or other social and economic resources, but must seek security through their husbands, sons, or other male kin (Cain 1978). Throughout their lives, women are meant to be under the protection of a male guardian, a father, brother, husband or son; a woman without male protection is open to various forms of male harassment as well as female disapproval (Kabeer 1997). Thus, in the context of Bangladesh, a striking feature of gender subordination is the extent to which women rely on male protection as much as they rely on male provision (Kabeer 1997). In such existing system, due to the absence of husbands and fathers, women’s dependency on non-migrant male in-laws can be heightened. This is relevant to the rural wives, because family formation system in rural Bangladesh is that almost all couples begin life together as part of a joint family headed by another couple, usually the parents of the male partner (Amin 1998, 207). However, interestingly, my data from the villages show left-behind wives often rely more on paternal male support than on the support of male members of husband’s family, even though the wives stay at in-laws’.

In rural Bangladesh, when a son separates from the parental household, he does not go far; he merely sets up a separate cooking arrangement, often choosing to build his own hut in the same compound (Amin 1998, 209). A son builds a separate household only when he is married.
Amin’s (1998) sketch of extended family living arrangement is typical of the living arrangement of my research participants from the villages.

**Figure 6.1. Sketch of an extended family household in rural Bangladesh**

![Sketch of a *bari* with four households.](image)

Source: Amin (1998, 208)

Here, *bari* refers to house in Bengali. The hut of mother usually refers to hut of the parents. It is important to note here that in above sketch mother owning a hut does not necessarily indicate she is an influential or head of the family. Rather, Amin (1998) mentions in her research that the elderly mother is dependent on her sons for survival. In such household even though each son has his own hut, many facilities (such as, latrine and tube well) continued to be shared. The kin relationships among rural neighbours are usually patrilineal because the kinship system is patrilocal (Amin 1998, 209). South Asian researchers (Sharma 1986; Kibria 1995; Bagchi et al. 1997) have repeatedly shown that in this continent, family and households are not to be understood as mere economic units, but rather as a matter of extended kinship and co-dependency beyond the realm of economics (Karim 2012).
As I mentioned earlier, even though the village left-behind wives stay at in-laws (in a patrilocal settings), wives still depend on their paternal male members, particularly on father and brother for daily necessity. Jahanara’s (35) experience from Bagichapara village is one such example. She stays at her in-laws, where her elderly father-in-law has one hut and a brother-in-law with his family lives in another hut, under the same compound. Similar to Amin’s (1998) sketch. Her mother-in-law is dead, and both her husband and son are abroad. Jahanara (35) says:

My father and brother do the grocery for me. There is a village market in every Tuesday, they (father and brother) buy it for me and bring it here. I do not go to markets. Even if I need a sandal for myself, I don’t know how to buy it. I ask my father or brother to buy it for me.

Although Jahanara (35) stays at in-laws, the support from her father and brother is essential for her.

For, 46-year-old Bilkis, from Harvanga village, the situation is slightly different. Her-in-laws are dead, and her husband is in Saudi Arabia. Since, her husband does not have extended family members, this leads to several safety issues. Bilkis (46) brought her newlywed younger sister and her husband who are financially less well off than Bilkis, to stay with her. Bilkis (46) says, the presence of a male member in the house (in this case, the husband of her younger sister) is essential for safety purposes. In her words:

After my husband went abroad, I faced a lot of problem. People bothered me a lot. They tried to steal stuffs from my house and made it almost impossible to live in peace. My husband sent me a new phone from abroad. It had been a week only; I even could not use it and it was stolen from my house. The thief took a ladder to break the grill and came inside my house. After that incidence, I brought my younger sister and her husband to stay with me.

Now, not all the left-behind wives in villages are financially as well-off as Bilkis (46), to provide for another family, in return who safeguard her. For such wives, the help of extended male family members both from their paternal and in-laws’ sides, is vital and often without it, left behinds are most vulnerable.
6.2.1. Narratives of ‘Father like Figure’

Village left behind wives describe their uncle or brother as father figure to them. What is fascinating is, regardless the age difference whether it is a young left-behind wife or middle-aged wife, they mention about natal male kin in similar tone. For 18-year old Habiba (looks younger than 18) from Harvanga village who recently got married with a migrant man over phone, stays with her mother and uncle (father’s younger brother) and his family. Habiba’s father is a migrant himself and hence Habiba and her mother depend entirely on Habiba’s uncle. Habiba’s father sends money to his brother and not to his wife, and majority of the decisions from grocery shopping to Habiba’s marriage are taken by the brother (Habiba’s uncle). However, neither Habiba nor her mother see it as a problem, rather they are content with the fact that a male member of the family managing all the important aspects of everyday life while Habiba’s father is away. In Habiba’s words:

I do not have any problem because of my father’s absence. My uncle does everything for us. He (uncle) married the younger sister of my mother. So, we all live together. We do not even have separate cooking system. My uncle is like my father. Chacha babar moto. He only has a son and no daughter, that is why he treats me like his own daughter.

Habiba (18) stays at the joint family of her father, and her uncle does not have separate household or cooking system. This is also due to the fact that Habiba’s father sends money to the brother and hence, the cooking and everything is together and not separated. If Habiba’s father had sent money to his wife only, Habiba and her mother may have separate household or cooking system in that scenario. Another interesting point should be noted here, that is the marriage between kin. Because Habiba’s uncle married Habiba’s mother’s sister, the families are more willing to share their labour and money. If the uncle had married someone from a different family, Habiba’s mother may not have been willing to share cooking and may also have opposed the idea of her migrant husband sending money to his brother. Because her sister-in-law is her own sister, she is more willing to share the household with her.

In this light, it can be said that left-behind women such as Habiba’s mother exercise agency by investing in her natal kin (e.g. getting her own sister married with brother-in-law). Since, in Bangladesh, the classic patriarchal pattern that a married woman’s labour is the property of her husband and his family, and all assistance should go to the husband’s kin (SultanAhmed and Bould, 2004). Since, there is no other way Habiba’s mother can invest financially in her natal
kin, by getting her sister married is one way to help her natal kin. As marriage is considered as ultimate succession of a woman’s life in Bangladesh (Chowdhury 2004; Rozario 2006). Previous research from North India shows, cultural practices tend to constrain or erode the personal links between a married woman and her natal kin directly diminishes the woman’s autonomy (Dyson and Moore 1983, 46). In a culture where married women are not supposed to or encouraged to help their natal kin, Habiba’s mother’s way of helping her natal kin, can be the example of how left-behind wives in the villages negotiate their own demands.

40-year-old Fatima from Harinmara village, whose husband is in Saudi Arabia for 12 years, mentions about her brother in similar tone “my brother is like my father”. Fatima’s (40) son is also abroad, who he has left a young bride as daughter-in-law to Fatima. Fatima being a mother-in-law may own a more powerful position in the family compared to the positions of other young women such as her daughter-in-law’s. However, this does not necessarily imply Fatima’s greater mobility power. Although, such freedom may not also be wanted by the women like Fatima herself. As my conversation with her follows:

Fatima: I do not go out much. I rarely go to my relatives’ place. I sometimes go to market. I go to the town only if I need to see a doctor. My brother takes me there or his wife. Sometimes, I go with my husband’s sister. My brother would never let me go just by myself. My brother takes care of me like a father takes care of his daughter.

MK: Is it because your husband is abroad?

Fatima: My brother treats me like this since I was a child.

From Fatima’s tone, it is clear that she is proud of her protective brother and grateful to him that he provides the supports to her. And that she is not neglected, someone always accompanies her if she needs to travel. It also implies that women in the villages prefer the support from male members of the family, rather than an independent status. The mindset of the villagers (including both men and women) is not prepared yet, to challenge the existing norm which confers women to be protected, dependable on men and men as protector and provider for women. This village norm remains unchallenged in the context of men’s migration. Fatima’s explanation of her brother’s affection towards her regardless of her husband’s migration status, suggests this.
Habiba (18), Jahanara (35) and Fatima’s (40) stories explain that women and girls are not considered as burden to their natal kin in traditional villages of Bangladesh. Their experiences show that the support from their natal kin does not stop even after marriage. This also challenges the view that in impoverished communities’ parents get their daughters married in order to get rid of them. Previously, scholars have found that early marriages reduce the economic burdens involved in supporting females who will marry out and away, and whose children will contribute neither income nor offspring to their mother’s natal group (Dyson and Moore 1983). My data challenges this notion. Over the decades that practice has changed. Today, early marriages are not done to get rid of the daughters, if this was the case, then the support from natal kin would have been stopped after marriage. However, it is important to mention these experiences are shared by women whose husbands are abroad. Wives of non-migrant men in the villages may not receive similar support from natal male family members. Having their husbands around, they might not require that extra support. Although, similar to Fatima (40), many of the left-behinds emphasize that they receive the support from their natal male kin (father/brother/uncle) not because their husbands are abroad, but because their natal male kin genuinely care for them and would have done the same if the husbands were non-migrants.

Next, I analyse the experiences of cousin marriage and son preference in the migrant families.

6.3. Cousin Marriage and Son Preference

Marriage between cousins is widely practiced among Muslims and it is still found to be common among South Asian Muslims. The most important and overriding reasons for consanguineous marriages, both in South Asia and the Middle East, appear to be social and cultural considerations (Hussain 1999, 455). Despite increasing urbanization and nucleation of families, as well as increases in female literacy, marriage choice continues to be strictly the domain of parents, reinforced by the vocal or tacit support of elder married siblings (Korson 1969; Rao et al. 1972; Khlat et al. 1986). Muslims often feel proud of this practice as it is opposed to Hindu (North Indian) customs where young girls marry into distance villages, take dowries from parents and thus considered as burden to parents (Gupta 1987; Jejeebhoy & Sathar 2001; Dyson and Moore 1983). As cousin marriage is not allowed in Hindu customs girls are treated as temporary members in their natal homes (Dube 1988), by contrast in Muslim communities, cousin marriage and close natal family ties ensure that women are not cut off from family support (Jejeebhoy & Sathar 2001). Nevertheless, an important theme emerges
from my data on cousin marriage, that is the desire to maintain the ownership of properties within the kin. Marriage between close relatives allow to share resources and labour among the families, which they often do not wish to share with completely strangers. However, cousin marriage also promotes early teen marriage in the villages. The following example explains it further.

During my participant observations and informal interviews with women from the villages, some women say there is no safety issue for young girls in the villages. One of such women is 32-year-old Jotsna from Bagichapara village. Her 17-year-old son is a migrant and married to his 13-year-old maternal cousin sister. When I asked Jotsna (32) to explain what the reason behind teen marriage is then, if there is no safety issue for young girls, she replies:

> When girls hit teenage, they look beautiful, cousin brothers start growing feeling for them, and often it is a mutual feeling. When my own sister’s daughter became teenage, I told myself there is no point if someone else takes her and her property and why not my son marries her, instead? That is why we got them married. It is not like the girl was facing harassment or anything.

This example indicates, the motives behind teen marriages in the villages. Often, the main and underlying motive behind cousin marriage is the desire to control property. Jotsna’s son is entitled to own the property of his cousin by marrying her, especially when the girl does not have any brothers. Also, the fact Jotsna’s son migrated after the marriage indicates the in-laws provided financial support for his migration. But the young girl had to stop her education since marriage, like any other girl in the village once married they are asked to stop going to madrassa or school. Hence, in this case, cousin marriage between two teens has facilitated a young man’s migration but put an end to his wife’s education.

Another particular trait needs to be noted in Jotsna’s (32) attitude, that is her confidence level. While majority of village women are shy to talk, Jotsna is unlike. From her tone it is clear that the decision about her son’s marriage and migration, is taken by her. However, Jotsna’s husband is not a migrant and a village farmer. Hence, she is not a left-behind wife herself, but her married migrant son makes her a mother-in-law of a young left-behind-wife. Yet, the important fact behind her influential status in the family is something different. And that is the fact that her first child after marriage is a son and not a daughter. In her words: ‘‘I gave birth to my son as my first child, so you can understand my position in the family!’’ protthom sol I beta sol amar. Jotsna’s (32) story echoes the previous research findings on the relationship
between Bangladeshi women’s status in the family and giving birth to sons. In patriarchal society, where women’s opportunities outside the home are severely constrained, their survival strategies focus inward on family and children (Morgan et al. 2002, 517). Bearing children, especially sons, solidifies a woman’s position in her husband’s or in-law’s; also, because sons are considered reliable supports for mother during her old age (Cain et al. 1979; Amin 1998; Morgan et al. 2002; Jejeebhoy & Sathar 2001). Much of the rationale for reliance on sons is grounded in the reality that a married daughter is herself dependent on her husband, and therefore unable to care for her parents (Amin 1998).

Thus, in Bangladeshi villages, women who give birth to sons have more influential status compared to women who do not give birth to sons, or women whose first child is not a son. This is certainly the case with Jotsna (32) and her 35-year-old sister-in-law Sukhimoni. Sukhimoni (35) and Jotsna’s (32) husbands are two brothers, Sukhimoni’s (35) husband is the elder one. Both families stay in the same bari but different household (cooking system) as mentioned in the Figure 5.1 (Amin’s sketch). Sukhimoni’s (35) husband (the elder brother) is a migrant and their first child is a daughter. On the other hand, Jotsna (32)’s husband (the younger brother) stays home (farmer) but their first child is a son. Theoretically, due to age hierarchy the wife of elder brother should own more power in the family than the wife of younger brother. But as Jotsna (32) herself mentions, because she gave birth to a son first, she is the dominant character. Her dominance is also visible when she mentions as ‘`amar bari’ ‘my house’, while Sukhimoni (35) agrees and does not say anything for herself. Jotsna (32) being a wife can claim her husband’s bari (house) as her, while Sukhimoni (35) is not confident enough to say so. Also, during my conversation with these two women, Jotsna (32) repeatedly stopped Sukhimoni (35), often replying for Sukhimoni (35). Research on South Korea, China and North India suggests, eldest son is supposed to be responsible not only for the parents but also for the ancestors, and the eldest son’s wife has a significantly higher probability than other women, of having additional conceptions if she has not yet borne a son (Larsen, Chung and Das Gupta 1998). In Sukhimoni’s (35) case, not giving birth to a son in the first place, has relegated her position at in-law’s.

The next example of cousin marriage is 24-year-old left-behind wife Adori’s marriage, from Harinmara village. She has been married for nine years with her maternal cousin brother who is a migrant worker in Saudi Arabia. Adori (24) is reluctant to comment on whether her marriage is arranged or love marriage. In her words:
It was like, my parents were receiving marriage proposals for me from other villages. And we are three sisters, we do not have any brothers. I am the youngest one and my two other sisters are married. He (my husband) is the son of my mother’s own brother. So, my father-in-law is actually my maternal uncle, Mama hoi. And this house (in-law’s house) just next to my parent’s house. Both my parents and in-laws thought because my parents do not have any son, if I marry my cousin, I can stay close to my parents and can look after them.

Hence, in Adori’s (24) case, marrying her cousin served the purpose of staying close to her parents. Adori’s in-laws seem to be affluent (newly build brick house, modern furniture) compared to Adori’s parents. The reason is Adori’s father-in-law himself is a return migrant and his son (Adori’s husband) is a current migrant. Due to her father-in-law’s affluent status (status improved through migration), Adori’s parents did not have to contribute financially towards her husband’s migration. Particularly, the fact that both parents and in-laws thought Adori can take care of her parents by marrying the cousin and staying close to parents, by some means, challenges the tradition that only sons are capable of taking care of their parents. Chowdhury (2009) found in her research that Bangladeshi married women who want to look after their parents are criticised by their husbands and in-laws’ families. Adori is capable of looking after her parents even after her marriage, because she is married to her cousin whose family is compassionate towards her own parents.

Thus, in Adori’s case, cousin marriage is more about convenience and mutual willingness between two close families. Adori’s father-in-law being her maternal uncle and residing next to her parents’ house also contradicts Amin’s (1998) claim that rural kinship system is patrilocal. When, the system may still patrilocal as Adori resides with in-laws, but it is also prevalent that more close relatives of mother’s side of the family resides in close approximation. This also happens, when a family member from father’s side marries someone from mother’s side. Similar to Habiba’s uncle’s case who married Habiba’s mother’s younger sister. As Das (1973) points out in her research on Pakistan, if a pair of brothers marry a pair of sisters, their children will be both patrilateral and matrilateral first cousins. Also, marriage between such cousins is not uncommon.

When marriage between cousins is more common in the villages, it is also not uncommon in sub-urban areas. 50-year-old left behind wife Kolpona from sub-urban Munshiganj, got her daughter married with the son of Kolpona’s own sister. Kolpona’s son-in-law is also a migrant,
which makes Kolpona’s daughter a left-behind wife like Kolpona herself. Kolpona’s daughter is studying honours degree and continuing study even after marriage. When I asked Kolpona if the in-laws and husband are fine with the wife continuing education after marriage, Kolpona replies:

Yes, my son-in-law is a good person. I got my daughter married within our own family. My son-in-law is my own sister’s son. He gives his full support to my daughter to continue her education and also fine with if my daughter wants to do teaching job after getting her degree.

Kolpona’s daughter is one of the fewest left-behind women who are pursuing higher degree. Although, among my research participants the level of education is higher for sub-urban women compared to women from the villages, but not a lot of sub-urban left behind wives are getting honours degrees. Hence in Kolpona’s daughter’s case, in addition to being a sub-urban woman, husband’s support or permission to continue study is crucial. If the girl was married to an outsider, the husband may not have enough trust on newly wife to let her continue education which requires her stepping outside of the house every day. Qualitative research on cousin marriage from Pakistan shares similar findings. As Hussain (1999) finds, when a match is available within the family, the girl is allowed to continue her education to the level that correlates with the expectations and approval of her future in-laws.

25 yea-old sub-urban Munni shares similar story. Munni (25) is happily married to her cousin who is a current migrant in Malaysia. She is also pursuing her honours degree (like Kolpona’s daughter) and the only wife I interviewed mentions that she is planning to join her husband in Malaysia. She describes her relationship with her husband as:

My husband and I were married when we were both young. We had to work really hard to come where we are today. I have been doing tutoring for long time. He (husband) is my cousin. He is the son of my mom’s brother. My father-in-law liked me for his son, and he (husband) also likes me, so my mother agreed for my marriage. My husband is a really good man. That is why my mother also liked him for me.

Hussain (1999) also suggests, cousin marriages attach far less importance to the physical attributes of the bride to be. It is almost a practice that a girl’s family often goes through a series of very stressful visits by potential mothers-in-law and sister-in-law, who often assume the role of ‘bride inspector’ to search for a fair complexioned and pretty bride; to avoid such
situations, girls’ parents often opt for marrying them off within family (Hussain 1999, 457). This scenario is not unlike among Bangladeshi communities as well. However, the closest picture that resemble the stories of my research participants is what Fischer (1991) finds: for Pakistanis, marriages between close kin are often in part an attempt to increase similarity, compatibility, and understanding between the couple. The final decision is based on the assumption that social and cultural similarities shared by first cousins were likely to facilitate the development of a stable marital bond (Hussain 1999). This explains the cases for Adori, Munni, Kolpona’s daughter and Jotsna’s son, all of whom are married to their cousins; and all the husbands among the couples are migrant men.

Sub-urban Munni and Kolpona’s daughter by marrying their cousins can continue education after marriage. Whereas in the village, cousin marriage does not help young bride to continue education, for example Jotsna’s daughter-in-law. However, this is not due to cousin marriage, rather a village custom where girls are not allowed to continue education after marriage. Cousin marriage in the villages also, rather provides more support for the wives due to the congenial relationship with in-laws. Wives feel confident because they are not judged by in-laws when in-laws are already kin. This is true in Adori’s case, who helps her father-in-law who is the maternal uncle in his farm work (looking after cows). This relationship may not have been easy, if the father-in-law was not her uncle. Usually, left-behind wives are not involved in such work in the village, but Adori is.

For Kolpona’s daughter and Munni, their continuation of study after marriage is more related to their marriage with cousins and them being sub-urban women. Their husbands’ migration may not have any direct impact on it. From the above analysis, it can be said that men’s migration does not oppose the practice of cousin marriage. When a community is rather benefited by a custom, a change in such custom is not desired. Having said that when such customs promote early marriage or other health concerns, the custom should be challenged. Yet, consanguineous marriage seems to work better for left-behind wives, when in-laws are more understanding towards their daughter-in-law in such marriages. There is an increasing interest in studying the health effects of consanguineous marriage, but such research must consider the sociocultural context in which marriage decision-making takes place (Hussain, 1999).

When in some cases, cousin marriage has facilitated men’s migration (Jotsna’s son’s migration) and left-behind wives get supportive in-laws due to cousin marriage (Adori,
Kolpona’s daughter, Munn), the impact of men’s migration on son preference is slightly vague. In most part of the world, infanticide was the main form of sex selection before the introduction of prenatal ultrasound visualization in the early 1980s (Almond et al. 2013). Most religions including Christianity and Islam have banned female infanticide (Almond et al. 2013). However, selective abortion of female fetus is very common across Asia (Pison 2004) and one that has spread like an epidemic in India (Sharma 2013). Puzzlingly the same thing does not seem to be happening in Bangladesh, on the contrary, the national statistics seemed to be suggesting that the survival for girl babies is becoming increasingly similar to boys and there is no evidence that parents are resorting to sex-selective technologies (Kabeer 2012). My research participants also confirm this fact, as many of them have female children; many have first child as female and no complain or regret about it. Since, such positive attitudes towards female children already exist or on the rise, it is hard to say if men’s migration has any contribution on it.

None of my participants mention about sex selective tendency or abortion, rather some even mention their desire to have at least one daughter. However, these positive attitudes towards female children do not necessarily indicate positive changes towards the upbringing of female children. This is particularly the case in the villages, where most of the migrant men (returnee and on leave) I interviewed, still hold traditional believes which are against female education and overall female empowerment. I analyse this further in chapter eight on men’s views about gender roles.

How ‘religious’ reason behind son preference is discriminatory towards daughters, is discussed next.

6.3.1. Son Preference for ‘Religious’ Reasons

An important reason behind son preference according to the migrant men in the villages, is only a son can perform funeral of his father, a daughter cannot. 32-year-old return migrant Delwar Hossain says:

In this world, Allah will make sure we survive somehow! But we have to think about after life, right? That’s why, when we die, we have to make sure our son can perform our funeral and pray for our soul. When your own blood (children) pray for you, it is much stronger than anyone else’s prayer. That is why it important to educate sons in Arabic line or Madrassa. When a family do not have sons, they have to
call Imam to perform funeral, or maybe a grandson can do it. But if your own son is an Alem or Imam, this is much better.

This is the view hold by majority of the return migrant men in the villages. Return migrant men in sub-urban area also advocated for religious schooling, but not as much as the men from the villages. When this view does not directly undermine a daughter status in the finally, as no regret or hatred is shown towards having daughters, but unintentionally puts boys at higher rank than girls. As according to this view, after life is more secure when sons performed funeral. Interestingly, similar view exists in India as according to Hindu tradition, only a son can light a man’s funeral pyre (Almond et al. 2013) and in China and South Korea many believe that they will be ‘hungry ghosts’ in the afterlife unless sons provide the necessary rituals (Das Gupta et al. 2003).

In certain South Korean communities, it is common for women to be mistreated if they do not have sons, the husband might take to drinking and womanising and maltreat the wife (Das Gupta et al. 2003). When women are no longer blamed for not giving birth to sons in Bangladesh (at least in my fieldwork locations), the importance put on sons to perform funeral indicates the higher status of sons over daughters. The return migrant men’s such claims on the fact, confirm it. However, the migrant men from Bangladesh no longer care too much about the sex of their first child and want their wives to be pregnant quicker, as looking after a child would keep the wives busy; in absence of husbands the wives will feel less lonely when they have a child. Rao’s (2012) research on Bangladeshi migrant men suggests similar findings: during their home visits men preferred their wives had a child or got pregnant before they left again, during the men’s each visit. The bride’s parents too approve of this strategy, as they feel that pregnancy and bearing a child protects their daughter from affairs and becoming the target of gossip (Rao 2012, 31).
Conclusion

In this chapter, I analyse the changes in kinship system and family structure, due to men’s migration. I have shown that many of the traditional practices remain unchallenged, particularly in the villages: female dependency on males and consanguineous marriages for instance. Whereas changes in traditional living arrangements such as changes in patrilocal settings are apparent in sub-urban Munsiganj. I argue, migrant men from the villages uphold rigid masculinity by continuing the practice of patrilocal residence. Challenging patrilocality is considered effeminate in rural Bangladesh (Ahmed 2008). Men living close to in-law’s or with in-law’s are subject of stereotypes, generally considered undesirable position with its connotations of being, like the conventional daughter-in-law (Charsley 2005; Das Gupta et al. 2003). Hence, their left-behind wives are to stay with in-laws and not close to wives’ parents; as wives’ staying close their parents would question the husbands’ masculinity. On the other hand, migrant men from sub-urban area are flexible enough to let their wives stay closer to wives’ parents. Sub-urban men also do not mind purchasing lands and building property close to wives’ parents’ place, which is unlikely among the migrant men from villages.

My analysis shows, on the basis of living arrangement, sub-urban left-behind wives have greater decision-making power compared to the left-behinds from the villages. However, the left-behind-wives from the villages are not completely naïve. They too, often challenge the existing discriminatory norms towards women, in their own ways. For example, Habiba’s mother’s contribution to her natal kin, and Adori’s ability to look after her own parents.

When the consanguineous marriage remains unchallenged, and both sub-urban and village left behinds are rather benefitted from it; religious reasons for son preferences are stronger among migrant men from the villages. Regarding consanguineous marriage, the fact that Jostna’s son, Adori, Munni and Kolpona’s daughter, all are married to their maternal cousins indicate that mothers can be more active in making marriage decisions for their children. As it is also common to marry a cousin from father’s side of the family, marrying in mother’s side can indicate more affinity towards maternal side.
Chapter 7: Left-behind Wives’ Relationship with In-laws, Physical Mobility, and Decision-making Power

Introduction

This chapter takes forward my analysis of the left-behind wives’ relationship with their in-laws, and how this affects their physical mobility and overall decision-making power. This chapter addresses my first sub research question. While the previous chapter detailed the nuances in the living arrangements and changes in kinship system, the focus of this chapter is on more personal level such as: on the details of left-behind wives relationship with their in-laws and migrant husbands, cultural habits of the households and religious clothing practice.

First, I focus on the life cycle of left-behind wives. This cycle implies that a young left-behind wife, often too early, turns into a mother-in-law of another left-behind wife. This cyclical relationship between left-behind mothers and daughters-in-laws, is more prevalent in the villages due to the patrilocal culture. Next, I analyse how the concept of ‘good women’ obstructs wives’ physical mobility in the villages and I argue husbands’ migration seems to reinforce such norms further. Following this, I compare left-behind women’s physical autonomy, and everyday activities in economically successful and unsuccessful migrant households to analyse how these affect women’s status.

The last two themes that I focus on are: wives’ phone conversation with migrant husbands and practice of Burkha, which significantly affect left-behind wives’ physical mobility in both rural and sub-urban contexts.

7.1. Lifecycle of Left-behind Wives

In the previous chapter I discussed that majority of the village women I interviewed, stay at in-laws, while the majority of the sub-urban women stay close to their parents’ home. Hence, a thorough depiction of the relationship between the left-behind wives and their in-laws, is mostly evident in the village context. 22-year-old Sumaiya from Bagichapara village, stays at her in-laws, her husband is a migrant in Saudi Arabia for the last four years. Sumaiya (22) was asked to leave madrassa after she was given in marriage by her parents at the age of 13. She mostly does the household chores directed by her mother in-law and takes care of her 18-month-old baby. Sumaiya (22) does not receive the money sent by her husband, but her mother-in-law receives it. When I asked Sumaiya (22) if she can take any decision by herself, she
replies: “No, I cannot. Even my child’s father cannot take any decision without asking his parents. So, how can I?”

25-year-old Jesmin also from the Bagichapara village, shares similar experience living at her in-laws. Her husband works in Malaysia. Like Sumaiya (22), Jesmin (25) is too married off at the age of 13. However, while Sumaiya (22) seemingly did not complain about her life, Jesmin (25) revealed her frustration. She pointed that marriage at an early age was a mistake and she will not repeat the mistake for her daughter. In her words:

I will get my daughter married when she is at least 20. And I mean it. If I am alive, I will do this. I will not get her married at an early age. I did a mistake. I understand it now. I will not do the same mistake again. My parents did a mistake.

On the other hand, unlike Jesmin (25), Sumaiya (22) supports this tradition of child marriage. In her words:

This (early marriage for girls) is a village custom. We live in a village. If a girl is married, her honour is protected. See, now-a-days, it might be easier for a girl to fall for bad guys or for boys who harass girls. And if the girl marries one of such men, it is a shame for the girl’s family. That is why parents want their daughters to get married soon. If a girl is married, she gets less unwanted attention from local men.

The different perspectives on early marriage from two women who share similar background, indicate varying experiences at personal level. While both Jesmin (25) and Sumaiya (22) are submissive to their mothers-in-law, Jesmin (25) seems visibly disappointed with her life. At one point of the interview with Jesmin (25), her mothers-in-law, 40-year-old Mehera Khatun comes inside the room, and I take the opportunity to ask her few questions on her life too. Mehera Khatun (40) herself once was a left behind women when her husband was abroad in the initial years of their marriage. When I question her about the challenges she faced in those days, she replies:

When my husband was abroad, I had no problems. I was so busy serving my parents-in-law. No problem at all. I was busy serving this family and my daughter-in-law is doing the same thing. By the mercy of Allah, life will continue like this. No problem in our life.
Mehera Khatun (40) now a mother-in-law of a left-behind wife, has a more powerful and dominant status in the family, at least over her daughter-in-law. Mehera Khatun (40) emphasised on her tone that she served her in-laws in her young days to indicate she wants the similar treatment from her daughter-in-law Jesmin (25). While Mehera Khatun (40) is satisfied in her life and have no complain (appreciating her dominant mother-in-law self), Jesmin (25) is unhappy with her submissive daughter in-law self, and does not wish the same for her daughter in the future.

This structure of power relation between left-behind mothers and daughters-in-law can be referred to the literature on South Asian mother and daughters-in-law relationship (Das Gupta 1995; Mason 1986; Cain et al. 1979; Kandiyoti 1988; Chowdhury 2009), that I have discussed in chapter two. This cyclical nature of women’s power in the family continues to exist in the context of men’s migration, particularly in rural Bangladesh. However, while before this structural power relations between women were in families where men were already present, in the context of migration this is now between two generation of women whose husbands are absent for prolong period. In such context, the relationship between the two generation of women can be less traumatic and often congenial. Particularly when the mother in-law herself most of her life has experienced living without husband’s physical presence. When such relationships are pleasant and not distressing, the new bride of a migrant man can look up to her mother-in-law for support and guidance.

One such example is 40-year-old Fatima and her young daughter-in-law from Harinmara village. Both Fatima’s (40) husband and elder son are abroad. Fatima (40) lives with the 18-year-old wife of the elder son and their one and half year-old daughter (Fatima’s granddaughter). Fatima (40) also has a 14-year-old son, and she mentions, she would not want her younger son to be migrant like her husband and her elder son. The reason she mentions, she cares about her younger son a lot and cannot imagine a lonely and struggling life for him abroad. While describing her relationship with her daughter-in-law, Fatima (40) says:

My daughter-in-law, her daughter (my grandchild) and I sleep in the same bed. And my younger son sleeps in the front room. My daughter-in-law is young. She and her child are scared to stay in a single room. That is why I keep them with me in the night. We three ladies stay together, haha! My daughter-in-law and I share the housework. The grand child is so naughty! So, one always has to be with her, while other can do the housework.
Kaur (2015) mentions in her research on left-behind women in Punjab, India, that a gap in mutual understanding between mothers and daughters-in-law existed because of less time duration related to young women marriage and due to their formal relationship. Fatima (40) and her daughter-in-law’s relationship is contradictory to that. Their relation is friendlier and more unformal, rather than a dominant-submissive one. Fatima (40) mentions offering help to her daughter-in-law in household chores, unlike Mehera Khatun (40) who indicates, all her young days she served the family and now it is her daughter in-law Jesmin’s (25) turn to do the same. This demanding attitudes of Mehera Khatun (40) can also suggest the reason behind Jesmin’s (25) grief at her in-laws’.

Thus, the life cycle and the shift of the power among mothers and daughters-in-law continue in rural Bangladesh in the context of men’s migration. While some of such relations are uncomfortable (Jesmin and her mother-in-law), others’ can be considerate (Fatima and her daughter-in-law). Also, in the previous chapter I discussed left-behind women married to cousins or close kin often have better understanding with the in-laws (Adori and Habiba’s aunt’s cases in Harinmara and Bagichapra villages). De Haas and Rooij (2010) mention in Rural Morocco, migration-related tensions between migrants’ wives and their in-laws have an accelerating role in the nucleation of family. However, in rural Bangladesh, whether such tensions exist or not, co-residency with the in-laws seems to be the norm, at least in my field locations.

The two Hindu left-behind women from minority village Bhebrapara, stay with their extended in-laws. Migration of men from Hindu village is fairly recent (only two men migrated in last six months) and hence, those two wives do not have mothers or sisters in-laws who are left behind like themselves. Purnima is 23-year-old Hindu woman, her husband went to Kuwait six months ago only. Her father-in-law has five brothers and their families all live in the same house. Although, Purnima (23) says each family cooks separately, as young daughter-in-law she cannot take any decision independently.

None of the wives from sub-urban Munshiganj share the experience of being left behind daughters-in-law at the same time while their mother in-laws are or were one of such. Thus, the cyclical nature of left behind mothers and daughters-in-law, is unique to the majority Muslim villages in Bogura. For sub-urban women in this research, it is more common that both the husband and the father (which is common in the villages also) are migrants at the same
time. In such families, a new bride of a migrant man, gains first-hand experience of being a left-behind woman, as she grows up seeing her mother as such.

7.1.1. Conflict with In-laws

Left-behind wives from rural Nepal (Gartaula et al. 2012) mention of ill-treatment by the in-laws when the husbands were staying in Nepal and not earning money. The in-laws started being friendly when their sons went abroad to earn money (Gartaula et al. 2012). In rural Armenia (Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007) left-behind wives said, the in-laws were nice only when they were interested in the money sent by the migrants. Contrary to that none of the women in my research mention they were treated badly by the in-laws while their husbands were at home and not earning. One woman, 32-year-old Maya from Harvanga village actually mentions she was mistreated by her mother-in-law because the latter believed Maya encouraged her husband to migrate for money. Maya (32), whose husband is currently in South Korea says:

In the initial years, when he (husband) went abroad, my mother-in-law were furious at me. She said I am a greedy woman because I sent my husband abroad for money. But it was his decision and not mine. But my mother-in-law made me felt like a guilty person. She treated me very badly. She did everything except hitting me physically. Shudhu, gaye hat tuleni!

Maya’s (32) husband is one of the few migrant men from the villages who went to South Korea. To go to South Korea and Singapore labour migrants need certain level of education and often higher than the ones who go to Middle East. Hence, Maya’s experience can be exceptional, as her husband (Honours graduate) is slightly more educated compared to other men in the village and perhaps, her mother-in-law had different expectation for her son. However, Maya (32) says her mother-in-law generally dislikes her without any obvious reasons. In the villages, physical abuse of left-behind wives by the in-laws is also not uncommon. I analyse such cases in the chapter seven on vulnerability of left-behind women to gender-based violence.

For sub-urban women, such tensions with in-laws are limited due to their living arrangement or close proximity to the parental house and support. However, sub-urban Nasima (37) from Munshiganj whose in-laws are dead now, recalls her tensions with in-laws in her initial year of marriage. She says:
My in-laws used to trouble me a lot. That is why I used to stay at my parents’ most of the time. They (in-laws) had problem with my eating habit, the way I talk or walk, basically they used to trouble me for everything. Then when he (husband) came from Saudi Arabia, he bought (built) a separate house for me. I was young. My son was 5-year-old and I was pregnant with my daughter. He (husband) went back again, and I stayed with my children in the new house by myself, but without the troubling in-laws.

Many in the villages, unlike sub-urban Nasima (37), do not have the option of leaving in-laws’ house even if the in-laws are unsympathetic. However, this does not imply all in-laws in the villages are hostiles towards their left-behind daughters-in-law.

### 7.1.2. Company of Sisters-in-law and Relation with Father-in-law

Left-behind wives in rural Nepal (Gartaula et al. 2012) share distance with mothers-in-law but have friendly relation with sisters-in-law. While, the teen brides in my data mention their friendlier relations with same age sisters-in-law as well, some also talked about their friendly relations with mothers-in-law. One such example is 19-year-old Tahida from Harinmara village. She has been married for three years and her husband is working in Saudi Arabia. She stays at her in-laws with extended family members including same age left-behind sisters-in-law. She says:

I have two other sisters-in-law, we chat and make jokes. It is a happy environment. Our mothers-in-laws are also like our friends. They too join us. There is no hesitation between mothers and daughters-in-law. They treat us like their daughters and not like daughters in-law. We are very free with each other. We eat together, we share our household works. Life goes like this.

It is evident that teen brides are happier at in-laws when they have same age sisters-in-law in the house. 19-year-old Jannati is also from Harimara village, whose husband is working in Saudi Arabia for six and half years. She says:

I have to clean the house, cook three times a day and all these. But, after my brother-in-law got married and brought his wife, I have a help now. She helps me in the household chores and we also chat, watch dramas on YouTube. I have a company now haha!
This experience of women who stay with extended family echoes the literature that shows, left-behind women who stay at in-laws’ share lesser burden of workload (Gartaula et al. 2012; Desai and Banerji 2008; Amin 1997). My data show left-behind women are also happier in the extended family when they share it with similar mined or aged sisters-in-law.

Kaur’s (2015) research in India shows, due to family values and culture, daughter-in-law cannot talk too much with father-in-law. Both are expected to maintain a distance. This practice is common across South Asia including Bangladesh. Yet, in the villages it seems fathers-in-law are fairly engaged in helping their left-behind daughters-in-law on several occasions. Some wives explain when they need to travel far from the house, their fathers-in-law escort them. And the daughters-in-law take it as care from in-laws’ side and not as control. Jannati (19) mentions, her husband sends money on his father’s account and also sends her on phone. But if she needs anything, she can always ask her father-in-law to get it for her. This also indicates normal or daily communication with the father-in-law. Menjivar and Agadjanian (2007) mention, in rural Armenia and Guatemala the control that in-laws exert over the wife often increase when the husband migrates. Generally, women do not perceive this enhanced control as oppressive and, in fact, they tend to depict it as their in-law’s increased attention to their needs while their husbands are away (Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007).

Next, I analyse how relationship with in-laws and existing social norms affect left-behind women’s physical mobility.

7.2. Physical Mobility: “Vodro ghorer bou baire ghure na”- A respectable wife does not roam around outside!

Datta and Mishra (2011) state, in spite of the strong hold of patriarchy in rural Bihar, India, women were found to be relatively mobile. Left-behind wives go out of the house more often and face less restrictions from the in-laws (Datta and Mishra 2011). However, in rural Bogura, Bangladesh, it is fairly dissimilar. Wives are not supposed to move alone. They are always escorted by father or mother in-laws while going to the town or shopping or for other necessities. When they visit parents, either parents or male siblings escort them. At this point, I draw the example of Sumaiya (22) and Jesmin (25) from Bagichapara village again. Regarding to my question on physical mobilty, Sumaiya (22) says:

I do not need to go out. Even if I need, then I go with my father-in-law or my parents come to take me with them.
At this point of the interview Sumaiya’s mother-in-law comes inside the room and says:

‘‘Ei bou shei bou loi’’-this daughter-in-law is not like ‘‘that kind of woman’’! She does not even go to the next-door houses to chat with the women.

Here, Sumaiya’s mother-in-law is emphasising on the fact that her daughter-in-law is a woman of good character who even does not chat with next-door women. In a similar situation during the interview with Jesmin (25), her mother-in-law comes in and says:

We women do not go anywhere! Market is not a place we should go. My husband (Jesmin’s father-in-law) goes and brings everything for us. Women should always stay inside of the house. It is a sin for women to be outside.

Both, Sumaiya (22) and Jesmin’s (25) mothers-in-law share conservative values regarding women’s physical movement. Even in the families where in-laws do not seem this conservative, daughters-in-law are not expected to move just by themselves. While, in-laws’ attentiveness to the needs of their daughter-in-law cannot be denied, it also does not seem fair to promote and maintain a village norm that vilifies sole female movement. Almost all the female participants from the villages mention, they do not go out, when they go, they are escorted by family members. The women are made to believe in that ‘good women’ do not move just by themselves.

However, looking from a different angle, the limited physical mobility which enable the ‘good women’ status may be ultimately desired by the women themselves. Khan (1999) mentions practical concerns, such as bad roads, costly transport or possible accidents combined to make any movement outside their villages fraught with anxiety for rural women in Pakistan. As (Muller 1997; Archambault 2010; Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007) all suggest, to consider or prioritise the aspects that rural left-behinds value most about their lives, and not what an outside researcher thinks what is valuable for left-behinds. For left-behind wives in the villages, the ‘vodro meye’/’good woman’ status is certainly more desirable than the physically mobile or independent woman which is ultimately not respected.

Once married, the concept of maintaining the respectable status ‘Vodro mohila/ Good woman’ is heightened for females in Bangladesh. The society upholds the moral order of respectability in Bangladesh (Karim 2012). Hussein (2015) defines respectable femininity in Bangladesh as a form of subjectivity, a position of struggle whereby women feel they are always being judged. In turn women also judge ‘other’ women, essentially trying to come out of their own struggle
for respectability (Hussein 2015). This can explain the reason behind why village women in this study mention, ‘good women’ do not go out by themselves.

The construction of ‘respected women’ vodro mohila identity in the villages is such that women stepping outside by themselves are at risk of losing their respected status. Sen (1999, 17) argues, in late colonial India, between the public sphere and the home was ‘defining a distance between the vadro mohila (gentlewoman) and the magi (prostitute)’. Any public activity: public performance, freedom of movement and participation in labour outside the home pushed women from their accepted role of mother, daughter and wife to that of the prostitute who was an outcast (Sen 1999). Inappropriately, this mindset that space outside of the home is space for ‘loose women’, somehow still exists in rural Bangladesh where majority of the population is Muslim. While, in the villages of Bogura where I conducted my interviews prostitution rarely exists, the concept of ‘bad women’ is primarily related to shame or dishonour that can be brought by women who can elope with boyfriend to get married, women not maintaining Purdah (not wearing Burkha or hijab). In general, the concept of Baje meye ‘Bad Women’ is Beporda meye ‘women who do not maintain Purdah’. And maintaining Purdah is not only about wearing Burkha, but also about not being loud in public, and keeping contact with males other than close family members as limited as possible.

This pressure of saving the ‘respected femininity status’ is high on the migrants’ wives due to the absence of their husbands. For example, regard to my question on physical movement, 23-year-old Nurzahan from Harvanga village says:

No, I don’t go out alone. Don’t you understand? Husband stays abroad, so people can be easily judgemental about me! They can say, oh that migrant man’s wife roams outside alone. I have to be careful about my own sake!

Particularly, people outside of the family can be curious about a migrant’s wife’s personal life. And to avoid being exposed to local men, left-behind women in the villages stay at home as much as possible. As Khan (1999) notes for Pakistani women, movement outside home and village can pose a threat to women’s roles and the system of Purdah. This threat comes from fears and anxiety that female mobility will invite violations of honour (respectability) through sexual contact, wanted or unwanted, between men and women (Khan 1999). It is also common in the villages that young men (as young as 8 and 9-year-old) are often made to perform everyday tasks such as grocery shopping for the women to keep women’s contact with the unfamiliar males limited.
7.2.1. Greater Responsibilities on Men from an Early Age

Children are taught gender selective roles and etiquettes from an early age is most South Asian countries. However, in the migrant households, male children are further encouraged to carry out manly duties from an early age. In the previous chapter, I discussed the dependency of left-behind women on the non-migrant males of family. But, young boys in the migrant families, are also made to play crucial roles to lessen women’s physical mobility. Several participants including Salima (36) from Bagichapara village mentions, her 9-year-old son does the grocery for her. 15-year-old Monira married to a migrant man from Harvanga village mentions, her 11-year-old brother escorts her while going to her parents’ house. These accounts indicate male children are exposed to greater responsibilities in the migrant families at an early age.

7.2.2. Sub-urban Left-behind Women Are Seemingly More Mobile

Left-behind wives from sub-urban Munshiganj, are strikingly mobile compared to their village counterparts. Even though sub-urban wives are not engaged in significant wage-earning jobs, they are still someway connected to the outside world of their home boundaries. Some young wives are continuing education, and some are considering starting part time jobs (e.g. teaching, running a female only salon etc.). 27-year-old Rupali mentions she wants to start working as kindergarten teacher when her younger child grows up. 25-year-old Munni wants to join her migrant husbands in Malaysia. Many women also mention they go out of the house every day to take their children to school. All these accounts are very unlike to left-behind women’s experiences from the villages. Therefore, it can be said that despite being homogeneous Muslim population and fairly similar economic background, left-behind women’s status is heterogeneous when the village and sub-urban contextual differences are reckoned. Sathar and Kazi (2000) notes similar findings in Pakistan, where female mobility is higher in the sub-urban and central area compared to that of rural Pakistan.

Next I analyse how left-behind women’s status differs in economically successful and unsuccessful migrant households.

7.3. Successful versus Unsuccessful Migrant Households

In the villages, families tend to be economically successful when more than one male member are labour migrants and stay abroad for an extended period. Harinmara village has most successful migrant households and each of those houses has more than one man migrated. For
example, both father and son, two brothers, brothers-in-law etc. Joarder et al. (2017) also notes the higher number of migrants from the household living abroad, have positive link with the life satisfaction of left-behind in Bangladesh. Majority of the successful migrant households in my research are: newly built, have fancy furniture, tiles fitted toilets and television in few houses. Gardner and Osella (2003, xvii) mention on their research on migration and social transformation in South Asia:

Whilst abroad, male migrants are presented as suffering and selfless men of faith, who save as much as possible in order that their households back in the village may ‘eat’ their earnings. Meanwhile, back home, saving is discouraged; remittances are invested in house building and social relationships.

Return migrants need to hold on to their personal wealth but are under pressure to spend it (Osella and Osella 2000). Similar trend is noticeable among my research participants. 40-year-old Fatima from Harinmara village (successful migrant household) whose husband and son both are abroad says: ‘’now a-days in the migrant households, there is competition of who can build more beautiful house, purchase more beautiful furniture etc.’’
Image 7.1: Elaborate furniture at Fatima’s house, Harinmara village.

A mother from *Harvanga* village whose two sons are labour migrants in South Korea says:

> After going abroad, one’s everyday spending habits get changed. *Shoukhin hoi!* People become aesthetic after migration. Before also there was a desire to live nicely but no money to afford it. But after migration, one has money do it!

**Image 7.3: A room with fancy furniture in *Adori’s house*, *Harinmara village.***

However, the rooms with fancy furniture are not to be used every day. Image 7.1 room is only used when *Fatima’s* son visits from abroad, he stays in that room with his wife for that period. Similarly, *Adori* mentions the room with fancy furniture (Image 7.3) normally stays locked, and it is only used when her husband visits from abroad. The fancy rooms are also used as showcase of new wealth, when family guests come to visit. Almost all the successful migrant households in the village I visited have newly bought cooking pans (Image 7.2). Fatima explains, the cooking pans are actually not for using purpose, but a hobby to collect or buy more pans as women from other newly wealthy migrant households do the same.
Osella and Osella (2000) found in successful migrant households in Kerala, India, gold is specially associated with women, cash appears especially linked with men. For my participants in the villages, this hobby of buying new pans can be associated with women. The fancy furniture or new house indicate new wealth of a family or household as a whole, therefore, associated with both men and women.

The key question at this point is, how economically successful and unsuccessful migrant households differ treating their left-behind women. Left-behind wives from successful migrant households in the villages enjoy some level of privileges but such privileges are not significant. Evidently, in successful households left-behind wives have better relationship with in-laws. Left-behind mother-in-law Fatima (40) and her left-behind daughter-in-law’s mutually understanding relationship has been discussed in the beginning of this chapter. They belong to a successful migrant household from Harinmara village. From the same village and from similar successful migrant household is 24-year-old Adori. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, Adori is married to her cousin (who is a migrant) and her in-laws are her maternal relatives with whom she already shares an understanding relationship. Yet, she can exercise some privilege for being a wife of successful migrant and having understanding in-laws. She mentions, depending on the situation she can travel outside of the village just by herself. If her father-in-law is busy at farm, she can take her sick child to a professional doctor in the town Bogura, what many women from unsuccessful migrant households in the village cannot.

23-year-old Nurzahan is from Harvanga village (which also has more unsuccessful migrant households). Her husband works in Malaysia for 10 years and she stays at her in-law. Despite staying in Malaysia for a prolonged period, her husband could not make enough money and wants to come back to village soon. She says:

His (husband’s) visa was not good. He could not earn enough money. He can send only small amount of money, but he sends it to his father’s account. My in-laws do not share that money with me.

As discussed earlier, Nurzahan (23) fears people’s judgement on her physical mobility and she does not have any source of income. This also indicate, wives in unsuccessful households can be the most vulnerable. Similar attitude is also notable in 22-year-old Sumaiya’s case from unsuccessful migrant households in Bagichapara village. Her in-laws seem to be more conservative. Money sent by Sumaiya’s husband to her mother-in-law, is spent on the debts he
took while going abroad. *Sumaiya* (22) does not receive any money. They do not have fancy furniture or any other indicators of wealth. However, *Sumaiya’s* room is decorated with colourful flags of Saudi-Arabia brought by her husband during his last visit to home. As Gardner and Osella (2003) mention, goods which migrants bring home also involve imaginings of foreign places and the type of modernity (or lack thereof) supposed to be found there, regardless of whether this is expressed through prayer rugs or other religious artefacts brought from the Gulf.

**Image 7.4: Sumaiya’s (22) bedroom decorated with flags of Saudi Arabia. Bagichapara Village.**

On the other hand, in sub-urban *Munshiganj*, wives from unsuccessful migrant households can choose to be engaged in income generating activities. One such example is 32-year-old *Akilma Panna*. In her words:
My husband cannot send me money for long a time. For last six months he couldn’t send money, because he didn’t have a job. I am managing on my own through the little money I get from my beauty salon. Women from next door houses come to me, they are my clients. I am busy with it.

Here, Aklima (32) mentions she only has female clients to emphasise that she does not have to deal with men, thus her job is still respectable. Although, she is not earning enough, she is still at a better position than Nurzahan (23) the wife of unsuccessful migrant from Harvanga village. Nurzahan’s (23) in-laws do not provide her the money sent by her husband, and yet she cannot decide to engage in any sort of income generating activities as it is against the village norms.

Gungor (2008) found that higher remittances led to the spouse (generally) enjoying greater economic freedom and becoming more empowered both at the family and societal level. This observation is valid only when wives have access to the remittance send by their husbands. While sub-urban women in my research have access to it, for wives in the villages, their in-laws tend be the receiver and decision-maker on how to spend that money. Only when the wives are near the age of turning in-laws themselves (which is rather early in the villages, e.g. by age of 30) they can exercise some of such powers. Some new brides from successful migrant households in the villages mention they can go to recreation centre in the town for a day out or fun. But able to do so only when their migrant husbands visit and accompany them. This implies, even in the successful migrant households women have restrictions on their physical mobility.

7.3.1. Rejecting Television Culture

Regarding watching television an interesting trend is noticeable in the villages. Despite the popular believe that every household can afford or have a television these days, some migrant households prefer not to have it. Some of them mention they do not have television because they believe watching television is ‘un-Islamic.’ Whereas, in the same location other Muslim migrant households have television and they do not perceive it as ‘un-Islamic’. So-called Islamic preachers in Bangladesh are often known to promote an impression that says television is a ‘Satan’s box’. Many conservative families, particularly in villages, seem to uphold this practice by rejecting television. Also, they believe watching the popular Indian Bengali dramas broadcasting the troublesome relationship of mothers and daughters-in-law can have damaging impact in real life, encouraging the young daughters-in-law to be rebellious.
19-year-old Jannati from Harinmara village says:

We (she and her sister-in-law) do not watch television. My parents-in-law do not like it. They don’t want to buy TV. We have phone, so sometimes we listen to songs on YouTube. In-laws do not mind us watching YouTube on phone, but they just do not prefer having television.

34-year-old Jahanara from Bagichapara village says: “No, I do not have TV, my father-in-law does not allow it”. Jesmin (25) from the same village does not directly say it is her in-laws who do not prefer to have Television. Instead she says:

Jesmin: *Ei barite oi shob hoina!* Watching television is not the culture of this house.

MK: Do you used to watch TV at your parents’ house?

Jesmin: Yes. But now, I am used to of not watching it.

14-year-old left-behind wife Monira who usually stays at her parents, came to her in-law’s place during my interview with her. During the interview her mother-in-law stayed in the room, and often replied to most of the questions asked to Monira (14). Regarding the question related to free time activities, the mother-in-law says:

We listen to Islamic preaching or verses on mobile phone. Watching television is never accepted in this house (strongly mentioned).

On the other hand, 19-year-old Halima whose husband came back to village after two years of unsuccessful migration said she can watch television at her in-laws without any restriction. This preference for watching or rejecting television can be very personal (some families are more conservative than others in the villages). However, it can also be linked to the trend due to migration in the Middle East. As Gardner and Osella (2003, xii) found in their research on migration and social transformation in South Asia that ‘being modern’ involves an engagement with a more orthodox form of Islam as expressed both by changing religious practices and new forms of consumption. This attitudes regarding not watching television in migrant households can also be referred to the literature that argue migration to conservative countries can reinforce already existent conservative norms in home countries (Ferrant and Tuccio 2015; Tuccio and Wahba 2018; Bertoli and Marchetta 2015). Yet, such conservative practices can also be context specific (practiced in villages only), as none of the sub-urban left-behind wives mention about
rejecting television. Although majority of them do not stay with in-laws and their freedom of watching television is not taken away by the in-laws, unlike the case for the village wives.

Next, I analyse how everyday phone conversation with migrant husbands affects wives’ physical mobility and decision-making power.

7.4. Daily Phone Conversions: Policing Wives’ Physical Mobility?

Communication with their husbands is very important for the wives left behind. It serves to allay fears of infidelity, to maintain close relationship, to relieve stress (on board and at home) and to maintain relationship with children (Faroq and Javed 2009). For the left-behind women in this research, everyday phone conversion with migrant husbands is common regardless their rural-urban contexts. Unlike, Nepalese left-behind wives who said their husbands call once or twice a week (Gartaula et al. 2012). Majority of the wives both in the villages and in sub-urban Munshiganj have smart phones with video call facilities. Only few wives complained about the phone network; in general, getting access to internet is not a problem even in the villages.

For newly married couples who are physically separated due to migration, everyday phone conversation facilitates their relationship building. During the interviews, many young brides blushed when they mention that their husbands call them every day. Some even mentioned, their husbands call them more than twice a day. Menjivar and Agadjanian (2007) mention in their research on Armenian and Guatemalan men’s migration that some men phoned every day and even several times a day to monitor their wives’ every step, others went for weeks without calling. Such experience of husband’s control towards wife’s physical mobility through mobile phone is also common among my research participants. Especially for teen brides in the villages. 19-year- old Mim from Harvanga village says:

I always let my husband know if I go out. One has to inform her husband everything. If I go out or do something without letting him know, and he gets to know about it from someone else, he can get angry. That’s why I always let him know about my daily activities.

In most cases migrant man often has other male friends in the village, or even his family members who keep him updated on his wife’s activities. Similar to what Menjivar and Agadjanian (2007) found, men would also call their relatives and friends to check on the wives. However, Worby’s (2006) rightly says in the case of Mexican left-behind wives, while for the
women the frequent phone call can indicate both control and affection, the infrequent phone call is usually taken as sad news. If calling is not routine, then mutual suspicion about what the other is doing (new partner, using money unwisely, hiding information) sets in may lead to conflict (Worby 2006). One of only few women, Nurzahan (23) from Harvanga village, said her husband is unable to call her every day. But instead of being suspicious, she is sympathetic to him. She says:

He used to call me everyday you know. But now, Poor him! He got into some problem. He can’t earn money now. He wants to come back, but he doesn’t have papers (passport or visa). He can’t come, that’s why he doesn’t call everyday now. He calls in every 10 to 15 days now.

In unsuccessful migrant households like Nurzahan’s (23), phone conversation with husband is not regular. But yet, this does not create tension in her marriage due to mutual trust between husband and her.

It is important to note not only how people communicate but also to examine what communication means to the parties involved and how its form, frequency, and content relate to women’s position and to change their status (Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007). 27-year-old sub-urban Ruapli said, if her migrant husband takes time to pick up her phone, she asks him to explain the reason behind his late response. This is a remarkable difference between the rural-urban wives. Most of the wives from the villages do not mention they can question their husbands if they do not receive phone on time. Wives from the villages never even mention that they call their husbands, and it is always the husbands who call more than twice a day. When men are working in countries where such technologies are less expensive and more easily accessible and the women remain in countries with less developed technology, the dynamics of communication between partners reinforce relations of dependency and gender inequality (Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007). As Mahler (2001, 610) notes, under such circumstances, ‘’geographical location translates into social location.’’ Power relation between husband and wife can also remain intact due to everyday phone conversation. This is evident from the experience of the same sub-urban woman Rupali (27), as she says:

My son is so picky about food! He does not want to eat this or that! He wants to eat meat, then I need to go out buy meat and cook for him, he loves fried egg! Whenever my children want to eat anything, I need to bring it to them. See, their father is not here! What if they tell their father on phone that “baba (father) ma
Rupali (27) is always busy making children’s favourite food, to avoid her migrant husband making inquiry on how she spends the money sent by him. This also indicates, women feel a need to justify their spending habits to their husbands. Menjivar and Agadjanian (2007) rightly argue that men’s control over communication with their partners therefore serves to enhance men’s social control over their wives. Left-behind wives from the villages, even mention their husbands top-up the mobile phone credit from abroad, so that the wives do not have to go to local shops to do it. However, the wives see it as husbands’ care and not as restriction.

Gartaula et al. (2012) mention, due to the introduction of mobile phones, the women’s communication with their husbands has not only become more regular, but also more personal. This enables the wife to experience a transnational living through a continuous interaction with her husband (Gartaula et al. 2012). However, I disagree and argue that due the nature of the conversation the transnational living is experienced by the husbands only and not by the left-behind wives. Similar to Gartaula et al.’s (2012) findings itself, husbands instruct their wives about the disbursement of remittances and household affair, husbands perform a double engagement (Grillo and Mazzucato 2008) over the phone conversation. By nature, wives do not instruct, or engage in husbands’ everyday life abroad on phone conversation. The wives can only listen to the part of husbands’ life abroad which their husbands feel right or safe to share with their wives on phone. Therefore, the claim that left-behind wives experience transnational living, makes little sense in such contexts. This is evident in both rural and sub-urban context in this research, except sub-urban Munni (25) who said she is planning to join her migrant husband in Malaysia. Thus, unless the wives themselves living or visiting their migrant husbands abroad, the transnational living experience is meant to be only for migrant husbands and not for their left-behind wives.

I now turn to the final theme of the chapter, which is the practice of religious clothing Burkha and its impact on left-behind women’s physical mobility.

7.5. Practice of Burkha and its Impact on Wives Physical Mobility

Burkha is a matter of high relevance for the left-behind women I interviewed for this research. All the female participants from both sub-urban and villages (except two Hindu wives) wear Burkha when they step out their houses. They wear long black Burkha and colourful hijab to
cover their hair. The full-face cover *Niqab* is practiced by only one sub-urban women and another sub-urban woman who mentions she does not use *Niqab* but her daughter does. For young left-behind wives in the villages, even when they are escorted by other family members, the wives are expected to wear *Burkha*. Majority of the women said they practice *Burkha* for both religious reasons and physical safety purpose. 18-year old *Amina* (looks younger) from *Harinmara* village who had to leave school after her marriage to her migrant husband, says:

I started wearing *Burkha* since the age of 14th. In my class, other than 3 Hindu girls, most of the Muslim girls used to wear it. If a girl’s head and body parts are covered, then there are less problems on the street. Her everything is protected if she wears *Burkha*. Men do not dare to comment on her body or physical movement.

However, 22-year-old *Asia* from *Harvanga* village (whose husband is in South Korea), says:

I started wearing *Burkha* long before my marriage. Even though I wore *Burkha*, men on the street used to pass bad comments on me. That is why girls in the villages are married off early. Married girls attract less unwanted attention from local men.

This distinct experience of wearing *Burkha* and physical safety suggests, even in the similar background (villages) a woman’s perception of *Burkha* can be very personal and differ from one woman to another. However, unmarried girls attract more attentions on the street, is a common view shared by many in the villages. And wearing *Burkha* does not help a lot in such case. This is due to the fact that villages are less populated where local men can easily identify a girl even if she covers her hair or body. On the other hand, in crowded sub-urban area *Burkha* does facilitate women’s movement. This can also explain the reason behind why sub-urban left-behind wives are more physically mobile than their village counterparts.

Nevertheless, as I have already pointed out in chapter three that practicing *Burkha* in Bangladesh has established as ‘modern’ Muslim identity and symbol of dignity that middle-class women use to differ themselves from working class women (garment workers or maid servants) for whom *Purdah* is not essential (Rozario 2006; Hussain 2010). Therefore, the *Burkha* becomes essential for left-behind wives to signpost their respectable modern identity.

Yet, interestingly this ‘modern’ Muslim identity through wearing *Burkha* or Islamic dress seems to be applicable for women only, while men can continue to wear western style clothing and not Islamic or Arab style clothing. According to Islamic values both Muslim men and
women are encouraged to use coverings (women by adopting hijab and men by adopting a beard), both as a form of protection and modesty, and also a clear sign that they are followers of Islam (Roald 2003). Many return migrant men in both sub-urban and village contexts are seen without beard or proper Islamic dress. On the other hand, they strongly claim, that their wives and daughters should maintain Purdah by practicing Burkha. Generally, most Bengali Muslim men tend to grow beard from their late or mid-40s, whereas women are encouraged to cover through Hijab and Burkha since the age of 14th or puberty.

Image 7.5: A successful return migrant from South Korea and his family

Image 7.5 shows a young return migrant from South Korea wears Western style clothing while his wife wears religious clothing Burkha with a colourful hijab. The family photo is taken at a recreation park in Bogura district. Following Timmerman (2000), I argue that in Bangladesh, the burden of maintaining respectable ‘modern’ Muslim identity, at least through clothing, is on women only. Whereas men can flaunt in western style clothing and yet maintain their ‘modern’ respectable Muslim Identity.
Specifically, the wife of a migrant man may feel additional pressure to wear *Burkha* to maintain such respectable status. As 27-year-old suburban *Rupali* says:

> I didn’t use to wear *Burkha* a lot before marriage! But now, I have visitors from in-law’s house, so I practice it more after marriage! Because, if I don’t wear it, they might say: *look her husband is not here and she is roaming around without Burkha!* When I am at my parents’ I still remain cautious even if I don’t wear *Burkha*.

Thus, *Burkha* has facilitated this ‘modern’ Muslim wife identity for these left behind women. It has added a new dimension of respectability to the housewifization process in Bangladesh. This research brings a new focus to the practice of *Burkha* and its implications in the process of housewifization in Bangladesh in the milieu of men’s labour migration. It recognizes that, maintaining ‘modesty’ or respectable ‘modernity’ is up to women as women are carriers of cultural modesty. Labour migration thus indirectly reinforces female modesty and aligns with patriarchy where men have freedom to dress as they wish, while a certain dress code is promoted for women only.

However, it would be misleading not to acknowledge these women’s religious reasons for wearing *Burkha*. A lot of the women express the belief that, as Muslim women, it is obligatory to cover, and they are proud of their choice and ability to practice *Burkha*. This thesis does not intend to critique such religious practice. Thirty-two-year-old suburban *Aklima Panna* says:

> I wear *Burkha* for both religious and physical safety purpose. But more for religious reasons. It is a way Allah has shown for women. *Allah er bidhan*. And if I wear *Burkha*, it is really safe to walk on street. If you wear *Burkha*, you get respect and you stay safe.

Twenty-eight-year-old sub-urban *Sania* says:

> Burkha is very important for us. We are Muslims. We should follow our religion. We should think about life after death.

Some wives even mention that it is their choice to wear *Burkha*; it is not imposed on them by their husbands. One such example is 40-year-old *Moina*, a left behind women from suburban *Munshiganj* who says:

> It was my decision to wear *Burka* after marriage. I like to cover myself. My husband does not like the idea of wearing *Burkha*. He says, he has seen
women who wear *Burkha* and do unethical activities. He says *Purdah* is in your mind. *Moner Purdha holo ashol!* But I really prefer to wear *Burkha*!

Moina’s (40) husband works in Qatar and yet does not prefer his wife to wear *Burkha*. This can also indicate that not all men who migrate to the Middle East promote the practice of *Burkha*. Rather, it is Moina’s (40) own decision to practice *Burkha* for both religious and physical mobility purposes. I agree with Timmerman (2000, 24) who mentions on her research on Muslim women and Nationalism that:

> The veil (“hijab or *Burkha* in Bangladesh context”) also offers practical benefits to women: it is cheaper than Western clothing and it protects women against male harassment. Through this style of dress, they are able to claim their own legitimate place in society outside the confines of the family without branded as an ‘immoral’ person.

Women also use the headscarf as a means to enter, without recrimination, into the public domain (Ask and Tjomsland 1998). However, at the same time, as Rojario (2006) mentions in her research on *Burkha* in Bangladesh that *Burkha* has serious implication for women who decide not to or are not in a position to use it. Women are allowed to come out in public, but only as long as they wear *Burkha*; this means that the onus of women’s security is on women again (Rojario 2006). As for those who are not covered (including non-Muslims), if they are assaulted or violated, it is their own fault (Rojario2006, 378).

This analysis by Rojario (2006) leads me to the next point, a shared perspective on women’s character, mentioned by both the rural and sub-urban wives in my research.

**7.5.1. Narratives of ‘Ami valo toh dunia valo’ ‘if my character is fine, the world around me is fine’**

Similar to what Rojario (2006) concluded, the women in my research both in sub-urban and in the villages, seem to indorse a narrative that claims bad things (sexual harassment, gossip about women’s character) happen to only women of bad characters. To my question on physical or any other threats to women when their husbands are abroad many wives, especially who are in their 30s or above mention: “*ami valo toh, dunia valo*” which translates as: if my character is fine the world around me is fine. 35-year-old Jahanara from Bagichapara village says:
We do not face any sexual harassment issues. If your character is good, the world around is good. No one can bother you if your character is good. If you have bad intension in mind, then bad people can understand that.

In a similar tone 34-year-old Rabeya from the same village says:

No problem. Everyone respects me. Protects me. Ami valo toh dunia valo. I live with my son and mother-in-law. I have no issues!

Similar to the village women, 30-year-old sub-urban Jhorna says:

MK: Your husband has been away for long time; do you or your teenage daughters face any problem?

Jhorna: If my character is fine, then no one can harm me. By the grace of Allah, I never had any such problems.

This perception is problematic in two ways. Firstly, the women who said this, believed their character would be judged if they mention about any sexual or harassment issues. Secondly, by stating this, they are also implying that women whoever have spoken out about such issues are women of ‘bad’ character. This can also further be linked to the examples of why many women decide to wear Burkha other than the religious reasons. Since women who do not maintain Purdah can easily labelled as ‘bad’ women.

The practice of Burka is a complex criterion, which differs from person to person in any given context. For the migrants’ wives in this research it is twofold. For village wives, it is more related to a transition towards respected ‘modern’ Muslim identity and less to do with physical mobility. As their physical mobility outside of home is very limited. For sub-urban wives, it is both. For sub-urbs, Burkha is essential to maintain their respectable ‘modern’ Muslim identity, and also for their safe physical mobility. The common ground of practicing Burkha for both sub-urban and rural left behind wives is the religious purpose.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that the cyclical power relation between mothers and daughters in-law remains unchallenged in the villages. In the context of men’s migration, such relation turns as the life-cycle of left-behind wives. Consequently, in the villages, young left-behind wives’ physical mobility is severely restricted by their in-laws and local norms which are often reinforced further, due to husbands’ migration. On the other hand, sub-urban left-behind wives are relatively more mobile. The living arrangement (e.g. staying separately from in-laws), and the absence of traditional attitudes towards women physical mobility (which exist in the villages), enable sub-urban left-behind women to be physically mobile.

In economically successful migrant households in the villages, I argue that the change is visible only in material aspects such as: new houses and fancy furniture; but not in terms of greater physical mobility or decision-making power for the wives. Although, few women from successful migrant household can afford stepping out of the house by themselves, but they are able to do this on the occasion of emergency only (e.g. taking sick child to a doctor in the town). Village wives from unsuccessful migrant households are often more vulnerable without the financial support; since wives’ engagement in income-generating activities is against the ‘female respectability’ code. On the other hand, sub-urban wives from unsuccessful migrant household at most, can be engaged in ‘respectable’ small business such as running a female only salon.

Migrant husbands tend to monitor wives’ daily activities and physical mobility in both rural and sub-urban contexts through every day mobile phone conversion. Following, Menjivar & Agadjanian (2007) and Mahler (2001), I argue that daily phone conversation with migrant husbands further reinforces husband’s dominant status over wife. I claim that the daily phone conversation with the migrant husbands, cannot be recognized as left-behind wives’ transnational living experience.

Finally, Burkha plays many dimensional roles in left-behind wives’ physical mobility. I have shown that Burkha signposts ‘modern’ respectable Muslim identity for both rural and suburban left-behind wives. Aside from the religious reasons for wearing Burkha, left-behind wives often feel additional pressure to wear Burkha to avoid being judged by others as ‘bepordah meye’ ‘women who do not maintain purdah’.
Chapter 8: Left-behind Wives’ Vulnerability to Gender-based Violence, and Narratives of the Teen Brides

Introduction

This chapter analyses left-behind wives’ experience of physical violence and sexual harassment. It explores the challenges faced by the teen brides, and therefore, address my second sub research question. I argue that migrants’ wives tend to be more vulnerable as many cultural practices unjust to women (e.g. stigma related to divorce or harassment, gossip about women’s characters) remain unchallenged in the context of men’s migration. I argue, men’s migration promotes madrassa education and further prompts early teen marriage for girls.

The first sections (8.1 to 8.2) of the chapter, explore left-behind women’s vulnerability to gender-based violence. I begin it by explaining the context of violence against women in the family and the practice that encourage women to stay in abusive marriage (or with abusive in-laws for migrant’s wife) due to the dishonour attached to divorce. Next, I analyse left-behind women’s vulnerability to male harassment and fear of being target of gossip.

Section 8.3 focuses on teen brides’ perception of education, in-laws and married life. The study found, teen brides are not necessarily forced to live with their in-laws or husbands right after marriage. However, they are unable to continue education after marriage, in most cases.

8.1. Abusive Marriage and Stigma Related to Divorce

In chapter three, I discussed the literature on physical violence experienced by Bangladeshi women at the hand of intimate partners. It has also been discussed that in Bangladesh, women can experience persistent kinds of discriminations performed by other family members, apart from husbands (Hadi 2000; Jahan 1994). In the context of husbands’ prolonged absences such threats can be worsened. One such example is from my participant observation in Harvanga Village. Thirty-seven-year-old Rahela Begum and her husband had their teen daughter married to a migrant man. The girl stays at her in-laws’; who is verbally and physically abused by them.

My interaction with Rahela and her husband was on my way when I was about to commute to Bagiachapara village to conduct interviews. Rahela knew I was from the town and had come to the village to interview women, she assumed I had some political or authorial power to intervene and help her daughter. Rahela with her husband approached me on the street.
desperately crying for help (my male relative from the village was also with me at that time) saying:

‘Apa kisu ekta koren’ please do something, sister! My daughter just called me on mobile phone, her in-laws are beating her and throwing her out from the house! What should we do? If she ever comes back here, or gets kicked out from her in-laws’ house, she can never go back. This is exactly what they (in-laws) want.

At this point, other villagers also joined the scene. Both my relative and elderly villagers advised Rahela to contact the village Member (Government representative) to intervene and help. However, later I was informed that they did not contact the Member. Rahela’s migrant son-in-law convinced Rahela on phone that his wife should come back to her natal home (to Rahela and her husband), and upon return from Saudi-Arabia the son-in-law would take back his wife.

A key point here is to note that Rahela’s concern is more about her daughter getting thrown out of her in-laws unjustly and probably less about the physical abuse. Noticeably, as a mother, her tears for her daughter’s abuse are real and indicate Rahela’s helplessness; what is problematic is that Rahela still wants her daughter to stay with abusive in-laws. The next example would further explain such behaviour.

Forty-six-year-old Hafiza from the same Harvanga, whose husband works in Saudi-Arabia, shares similar a experience to Rahela’s Hafija (46) is the only woman among this age-group that I interviewed from Harvanga village who finished her high school. Hafija’s daughter is not married to a migrant man, but is however in an abusive marriage. Hafija says:

My daughter studied till college. She wants to study honours degree, but her husband and in-laws are not letting her. I did not want her getting married into that family. But my daughter and Hakim (son-in-law) had an affair. My daughter is crazy for him. But Hakim has already started cheating on her. My daughter found another girl’s private message on Hakim’s phone. Hakim often beats my daughter. Hakim’s parents disrespect me. My daughter is in an affair marriage! It is already a shame, now if she gets divorce, how would I show my face to the community! I went to the Member, so that he can intervene. But it seems like Hakim does not fear the Member. You know sister? In the next village, a young wife was killed by her husband, I just pray to Allah, hope my daughter would not get that same fate!!
Both Rahela and Hafija are unable to help their daughters in their abusive marriages. Rahela’s son-in-law’s and Hafija’s husband’s migration does not seem to have any positive impacts on such matters. Rather, the mothers are very much concerned about ‘shame’ attached to divorced women. Therefore, they still prefer for their daughters to stay in abusive marriages. Nabi and Chakrabarty (2002) found that in impoverished communities of Bangladesh, a deserted adult daughter and her children living in her father’s or her brother’s household would be a financial burden and a cause for shame. This is a wider social problem in Bangladesh and not unique to left-behind women. But this attitude remains unchallenged in the context of men’s migration. A daughter’s abuse by in-law’s is often overlooked for the sake of maintaining her married status.

Sultan Ahmed and Bould (2004) found in Bangladesh, that if the woman herself makes the decision to leave the marriage, she is more likely to have difficulties with her natal families. This violation of norms was so great that in a few cases, the natal family refused to have anything to do with their separated daughter (Sultan Ahmen and Bould 2004). A poor Bangladeshi woman knows only too well that if she divorces her husband, or even threatens to do so, he will likely be able to find another younger woman to marry, whereas it is unlikely that she would find anyone to marry her (Ahmed 2014).

Moreover, divorced mothers often have trouble getting their daughters married. Amin (1997) found in rural Bangladesh, daughters of female heads of households or divorced mothers generally face poor marriage prospects and may even have to accept marriage to a man who is already married. Such marriages are contracted for two reasons: a powerful perception of insecurity and risk of sexual violation for girls living in households without a male guardian; and inadequate savings required for a dowry (Amin 1997). The only dowry less marriage option for these girls is one in which there is no obligation on the part of the man to support his wife (Amin 1997). When such cases (woman’s marriage to older married man for security) do not seem to be occurring in the villages of my field work locations, divorce still seems to be taboo word for women.

Parvez (2011) rightly claims, in Bangladesh urban middle-class women’s education and professions provide them with the opportunity to leave unhappy marriages and still maintain

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15 Urban middle-class in Bangladesh stands for someone like my-self. None of my research participants belong to this group. The sub-urban women in my research represent lower middle class.
their respectability, whereas previously divorced women were highly stigmatized, socially excluded, harassed and faced difficulty in second marriage. Poor and lower-middle class women from rural and sub-urban areas are yet to experience such positive changes which can enable them to leave abusive marriages or to escape stigmas attached to divorce. Men’s migration does not seem to promote left-behind women’s education or professional activities, which can socially or financially empower women to tackle stigma related to divorce.

De Haas and Van Rooij (2010) mentioned on rural Moroccan left-behind communities, there is growing awareness among parents that arranged (premature) marriages tend to lead to divorce and women tend to marry later. Unfortunately, such awareness regarding teen marriage (particularly for females) is non-existence among left-behind communities in rural Bangladesh.

8.2. Risk of Sexual Harassment from Local Men

As discussed in the previous chapter, women in this research were generally reluctant to discuss any harassment issues, assuming their character would be judged. Since, ‘bad things’ happen to only ‘bad women’ according to many of them. Very few women talked about such issues. One such woman is 24-year-old Sathi from Harvanga village. Sathi (24) stays with her in-laws, her husband works in Iraq. She mentions she is often stalked by random local men and she possesses a sharp machete under her pillow for her safety. She says:

After my child’s father went abroad, I face many problems. Random guys call me on mobile phone. I don’t know how they get my number. I often find someone trying to see through into my room from the window, making weird noise near my window. You see this (she takes out a machete that she kept hidden under pillow), if someone tries to physically harm me, I would not think twice before attacking him with this. I have to save my life, it is Faraj16. Jibon, bachano faraj. I don’t have issues with my in-laws. But men in this village are not good. Specially, some married men have their eyes on me. The toilet is outside of this house. During the night, I am scared to use the toilet. If a man touches my body in the dark and If I scream, people will blame me and gossip that I am a woman of bad character

16 Faraj or Fard in Arabic means religious duty commanded by Allah. In this context, it means saving one’s own life when in danger, is a command from Allah.
Sathi (24) fears about being labelled as ‘bad woman’ even when she is the victim of persistent stalking. Her fear seems reasonable, as many women seems to narrate ‘only women of bad characters’ face such issues. As Khan (1999) argues, it is the women who suffers the loss of her own reputation, even when she is the victim. Debnath and Selim (2009, 138) found in Bangladesh, migrant men’s wives felt that they were more susceptible to ‘losing their honor’ or getting labelled as ‘fallen women’ or ‘easily available women’. Sathi (24) and her in-law’s financial condition still has not improved, since her husband cannot send enough remittances from Iraq. Even though, she lives with her parents- in-law, she is still vulnerable to sexual harassment by the local men, in absence of her husband.

All the three women mentioned above Rahela (37), Hafija (46) and Sathi (24), are from Harvanga village, which is least developed among the three Muslim villages and has more

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17 Majority of poor households and unsuccessful migrant households in the villages have tin shed toilets situated far from kitchen and other rooms. Successful migrant households have newly built tiles fitted toilets inside the houses.
unsuccessful migrants or poor households. Such issues are less prevalent in the village like Harinamra which has most successful migrants or relatively wealthy households (e.g. newly built houses with fancy furniture). This can, in a way, indicate that men’s economically successful migration has positive impact on reducing women’s vulnerable status. However, this seems to happen only when the men’s migration is visibly successful (e.g. in newly built houses) with relatively powerful status due to new wealth, in the society. The issue related to toilet can be a good example of it. Women in the villages, in a successful migrant or well-off household (e.g. newly built) do not have to go out to use the toilet during night. While woman like Sathi (24) from an unsuccessful migrant or poor household, does not have such facilities, and often vulnerable to sexual assault.

Debnath and Selim (2009) found in a Bangladeshi village, left-behind women experienced sexual abuse at hand of husbands’ friends and often by husband’s own brother. Given the culture is such that it is not common to talk about sexual harassment publicly or openly, one left-behind wife opened up to me during informal chat and off the voice recorder. A 22-year-old wife from Harvanga village mentions, a local friend of her migrant husband has eye on her and had tried to sexually harass her at a village wedding. But her mother-in-law is very protective and sensing a danger (possible rape) at the event that day, she made sure her daughter-in-law was never alone or just by herself. However, not every wife receives such support and can remain extremely vulnerable to sexual harassment at hand of close male relatives from in-law’s side, or husband’s friends.

The only sub-urban left-behind wife who mentioned about harassment issue is 37-year-old Nasima. She decided to get her daughter married when the daughter was 15th and stalked by local men. Nasima (37) says:

I was living so peacefully. Its only when my daughter turned 14th, such issues started. When I was a young housewife, I didn’t face any issue. My daughter became teenage and problem started. The local young men wanted to marry her. When she was only in 6th grade, young men used to stalk her while going to school. I had to go with my daughter all the time. Her father didn’t want to get her married early. It was my decision to get her married. By the grace of Allah, she is living quite peacefully now. Her migrant husband (my son-in-law) wanted her to continue study. I said no. There will be unnecessary problems if she continues to go to school. She studied till 7th
grade. I am not naïve. Someone liked my daughter, I didn’t like that family. I strongly said I won’t get my daughter married into this family.

*Nasima* (37) also mentioned, if her husband was around, she may not have decided to get her daughter married early. In Bangladesh and Pakistan (Khan 1999; Nahar et al. 2013), regular trips to school, college or work with its constant exposure to male harassment and the public sphere, required that a male family member supervise the girl or woman during her journey. This can further indicate; teenage girls of migrant fathers can be vulnerable to male harassment and opt for early marriage to avoid such incidents.

The little decision-making power that sub-urban women like *Nasima* (37) can exercise, is thus, used in way which further strengthen traditional practices. In chapter five I discussed, *Nasima* (37) uses active voice ‘I decided to get my daughter married’, and such confidence is lacking among village wives since no wives there mentioned strongly or use active voices regarding any decision-making power. But this decision-making power of sub-urban *Nasima* (37) seems to be reinforcing the unjust practice which encourage early marriage of young girl to avoid male harassment. Possibly, the only way *Nasima* (37) can help her daughter, is by getting her married (or stopping her education to reduce physical mobility). But the crucial point here is that men’s migration has not challenged the bigger problem yet. And the problem is, shame related to male harassment is intensely pervasive that a girl’s married status is more important and desired than her education.

### 8.3. Widespread Fear of Gossip

Fear of gossip has been a common theme across all the analysis chapters, in this thesis. Gossip can have conflictive consequences when considering gossip as a form of social control (Bourdillon and Shambare 2002; Van Vleet 2003). Gossip can be a source of entertainment (Dreby 2009) too, for the ones who perform it against others. In South Asian societies, ‘*what people will think*’ syndrome continues to reinforce traditional gender roles and deprive women from many opportunities (Pal 2019). Left-behind wives are often more popular target of gossip which increases their vulnerability. 37-year-old *Salima* and 27-year old *Shahnaz* are two sisters-in-laws from *Bagichapara* village, whose husbands are labour migrants abroad. According to them:

*Salima* (37): You know sister, the biggest issue is, when husband is not around, people talk about that woman a lot. Bother her a lot.
Shahnaz (27): If your husband is not with you, you are not powerful.

Shami na thakle joor I thakena.

Salima (37): When we go out people say bad things about us. They say, these two women are not just left-behind sisters-in-law, but characterless women choritrohin mohila.

MK: Who are these people? From the village?

Both (Salima and Shahnaj): People from the village, even our own relatives, everyone. Not our parents but people from this village and even from this house.

Salima (37): this is the biggest problem. When husband is not here, people get chance to talk about the wife. If my husband was here, they could not talk about me. there is no problem other than this.

Salima (37) and Shahnaj (27) have another brother-in-law who is not a migrant and lives in the same house with his wife and children. This non-migrant brother-in-law and his family often get into conflict with Salima and Shahnaj. Similar findings are shown in Gartaula et al.’s (2012) research where Nepalese left behind wives mention, people within the family including neighbours gossip about the wives.

Such gossip about wife if reaches to migrant husband somehow, can further create distrust and marital dispute resulting husband’s suspicion and greater restriction towards wife’s physical mobility. For example, Shahnaz (27) mentions, her migrant husband does not like her going out at all and often wrongfully doubts her intension. She says:

My mother stays in Dupchachia village. If I want to go there, he (husband) says ‘you do not need to go. Tell you mother to come and visit you. ‘If I wanted to take my child to doctor, he (husband) says ‘you are not intending to take the child to doctor, it just an excuse for you to go out’. Now I keep myself busy with my child and household duty. I say my prayers to Allah, eat on times, do whatever husband asks to do, I go where he (husband) permits me to go, I don’t go where he doesn’t want me to go. This is my life now!

Similarly, Menjivar and Agadjanian (2007) found, left-behind wives in Guatemala, to avoid marital dispute due to gossip that can reach to migrant husbands, wives keep informed their husbands about everything through mobile phone conversion. In the previous chapter, I
mentioned such example of Mim (19) from Harvnaga village, and other left-behind wives who also inform their daily routine to their migrant husbands over phone conversation. The more the wife informs migrant husband, the less potential for gossip and trouble, and the more he feels he is still a part of the house (Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007).

Joanna Dreby (2009) found in Mexican transnational communities that gossip about migrant men is also common. However, in my field work location, the fear of gossip is predominantly experienced by women left behind. Yet, Dreby (2009) also argues gossip does not treat men and women equally. Transnational gossip articulates norms that men act honourably to provide economically for their families while promoting women’s caregiving role in their families and monitoring women’s morality (Dreby 2009).

Similar to rural Moroccan society (De Haas and Van Rooij 2010) in rural Bangladesh also, men’s migration does not seem to bring a change in such culture where breaking the rules too overtly may well lead to social exclusion. Gossip, in particular, is a powerful social instrument that prevents villagers from breaking too overtly with the prevailing cultural norms on gender roles (De Haas and Van Rooij 2010). Likewise, the widespread fear of gossiping exists in all the villages and to some extent in sub-urban too. And upholding the good name of the family preoccupies the minds of villagers in social interaction (De Haas and Van Rooij 2010).

Thus, men’s migration can often leave their wives and daughters more vulnerable to gender-based violence. In chapter five under the Dependency on other male members of the family, I have discussed, the importance of male family members’ supports for left-behind wives. Often, having a supportive uncle or brother can make a left-behind woman less vulnerable when her husband or father is abroad. One can assume, the teen brides married to migrant men probably are most vulnerable due to their immature age. The experience of teen brides is analysed next.

8.4. Experience of Teen Brides Married to Migrant Men

In chapter five, I described the findings from the villages that when brides are of age 13 or 14 they stay with their parents and are not forced to stay with in-laws or husbands. Only when the brides are familiar or comfortable (in most cases when they are 16), they start living at in-laws. Other than the experiences of Rahela’s and Hafija’s daughters (who are physically abused at

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18 Sub-urban Nasima (37) decided to get her teenage daughter married to avoid male-harassment which ultimately could create gossip about her daughter.
in-laws’) mentioned above, the physical abuse of young brides seems to be rare in the field work locations. What is affected most due to marriage, is teen bride’s educational status.

8.4.1. Marrying a migrant man facilitates young bride’s education?

A number of villagers seem to uphold a superficial view that young bride would be able to continue her study if the groom is a migrant man. Parents of teenage girls often get their daughters married to migrant men, anticipating that girls (newly brides) can continue study after marriage without much distractions while their husbands are abroad. 34-year-old Rabeya from Bagichapara village, Bogura district, says:

We got our daughter married when she was in 5\textsuperscript{th} grade. Son-in-law was in Dubai that time. We got her married thinking that she will continue study even after marriage. The marriage was done over phone\textsuperscript{19}. That is why we got her married early, thinking that son-in-law would stay abroad for more five more years and my daughter would continue her study during that period. But my son-in-law had to come back from Dubai just after one year of the marriage.

19-year-old Tahida, married to a migrant man in Harinmara village, shares similar experience. Tahida is the only girl among the left behinds wives I interviewed from the villages in Bogura district, who studied till 1\textsuperscript{st} year of college.

MK: You went on studying till college! you didn’t continue it?

Tahida: No, I didn’t continue my college. My in-laws do not like the idea of me going to college, my parents wanted me to study. My parents thought, after marriage my in-laws will help me continuing my education. But the environment here is not like that. They (in-laws) do not like it that their daughter-in-law goes out of the house every day and moves around.

In both of these two cases, parents of the teenage daughters assumed being married to migrant men, would not affect their daughters’ ongoing education. While due to the unsuccessful migration (unexpected early return from Dubai) of Rabeya’s son-in-law, Rabeya’s 5\textsuperscript{th} grade

\textsuperscript{19} Phone or skype marriage is predominantly common in the villages. It is a kind of arranged marriage when the parents of brides and grooms agree first. During the day of marriage, an Islamic marriage officer Qaji is called upon at bride’s house, migrant groom’s consent is taken over phone or skype and his parents sign the marriage registry on behalf of him.
daughter had to quit education; *Tahida* had to stop her education as her in-laws forbade her going to college every day.

Nevertheless, the fact that parents of the young brides do not challenge their daughters’ in-laws when they pressure the new brides to stop education, indicates even for the girls’ parents, their daughters being married is more important than having them educated. Furthermore, this can indicate that in these villages, parents of the teenage brides do not necessarily get their daughters married with migrant men, hoping their daughters can continue study after marriage. Their ulterior desire is still seeing their daughters married regardless the fact whether the sons-in-law are migrant or non-migrant men.

In cases when young brides do have a strong desire to continue their studies, they usually lack the power or support to go against husbands’ or in-laws’ decisions. 19-year-old *Mim* from *Harvanga* village, was married to a migrant man when she was 16-year-old and studying in 10th standard at a high school. Her husband was in Saudi Arabia and their marriage was done over phone. She shares her experience,

> **MK:** You studied till 10th standard! That’s great!

> **Mim:** But my wish wasn’t fulfilled! Haha! He (husband) didn’t allow me to study. Before marriage they (in-laws) said, they will let me study. That’s why I agreed for the marriage. I thought it might be good opportunity that my husband won’t be here and as a married girl I will be continuing my study. People will not talk about me. But after marriage, he didn’t keep his promise.

In impoverished Bangladeshi communities, parents are always concerned about physical security of their teenage daughters if they are unmarried. Young girls are regularly subjected to harassment from local men, which threatens the safety of many families. However, married young girls attract less attention from the local youth (also indicated in chapter six). Chowdhury’s (2004, 250) empirical evidence from a Bangladeshi village shows that parents of young girls prefer getting their daughters married early because once married they are not so afraid about gender violence such as: stalking and rape in some cases. Due to such contexts, young girls and their parents consider that the label or tag of ‘married girl’ will facilitate a girl’s physical movement or protect her.

Hence, when *Mim* said she thought she would continue her study in her husband’s absences and people will not talk about her, she meant that as married girl going to school, she would
attract less unwanted attention from local men and thus, it would be less problematic for her physical movement. She also assumed she would be able to focus on study without much distraction as she does not have to perform traditional wife’s duty when husband is abroad, and she is at her parents’ place. However, her husband and in-laws stopped her education after marriage. Although, before marriage her husband promised her that he would let her study. It seems unfair, but Mim is not necessarily angry at her husband for changing his mind after marriage. She might be slightly dissatisfied, but her voice tone still shows enough respect for her husband. She says:

He (husband) tried nicely to convince me ‘Shundor kore bolse’. He said: ‘there’s no point for you to continue your study. You are married now. You don’t need any education. And people will still talk if you continue and I might get angry with you then. Better you stay home. You stay at my parents’ place or stay with your parents. Stay happy with them you don’t need to study.’

She uses words ‘nicely’ and ‘convince’, ‘Shundor kore’ to indicate her husband did not force her rather convinced her to quit education. However, her husband mentions ‘people will talk’ if she continues study and that would make him angry at her, implies even a married girl will not necessarily escape ‘people talking about her’ or unwanted attention from other local men. The ‘fear of gossip’ as discussed earlier, is strong here again. Furthermore, there are extra pressures on young bride of a migrant man to always stay vigilant to prevent others especially neighbours pointing fingers at her character.

An interesting point to note here is Mim’s migrant husband’s educational level. She mentions, her husband has BA degree which is significantly higher educational level compared to many men from the village. And yet, he married Mim when she was 16th, convinced her to stop her education after marriage. Since the results of a multivariate analyses on child marriage in Bangladesh, reveal that the risk of child marriage decreased as husband’s level of education increases (Kamal et al. 2014, 134). Such studies often ignore that men can already be married to young teen girls, such as in Mim’s case.

8.4.2. Husband’s migration does not change teen bride’s responsibilities towards her in-laws

Due to newly married status, teen brides often decide to leave education, even if they are not necessarily forced by the in-laws to do so. 18-year-old Amina from Harinmara village studied till 10th standard and was given in marriage to her husband when he came for a short break
from Saudi Arabia. Amina’s marriage was done before her final exam and after marriage she decided not to take her exam, although her husband left for Saudi Arabia right after their marriage. She stays with her in-laws, a joint family with other extended family members.

MK: Did your husband or in-laws ask you not to take the final exam?

Amina: No. It was my wish not to continue study.

MK: Why did you decide to do so?

Amina: (Long pause)…Now, you see after marriage one is not motivated enough for education. If I had given the exam, my results would not have been good. And this would have made me upset. That’s why I did not take the exam. Now, there is so many household works to do. It is not possible to skip these duties and manage time to study. And after marriage a lot of new relatives (more extended family members of Husband) come to see me. It is a busy time.

Clearly, it was not her deliberate choice not to take her final exam or not continuing education, but she highlighted the point that she was not forced by the in-laws or husband. The context of a newly married bride: new duties as daughter in law, meeting with new relatives, certainly remains similar for a bride whether she is married to a migrant or a non-migrant man. Similar to every married girl in the village, Amina’s priorities are fulfilling new roles at her in-laws’ place and maintaining her status as a good daughter-in-law and wife.

15-year-old Sauda from Bagichapara village was given in marriage when she was 14; her husband stays in Qatar. Since marriage, she stopped going to Madrassa. In her words:

Sauda: They (in-laws and husband) didn’t want me to continue study. I also didn’t want to study.

MK: Why didn’t you want to study anymore?

Sauda: After marriage, girls need to focus on household works, right? I am good at study also. But if I continue study, I can’t focus at home, I have to focus on study then. But, my mother in law is alone. My father in law is also abroad. That’s why I don’t want to continue study. I want to learn the household work (cooking, cleaning) so that I can help my mother-in-law.
Sauda’s in-laws are not a large extended joint family like Amina’s. Both Sauda’s husband and father-in-law are abroad; and she mentions at her in-law’s place only her mother in-law and a younger brother in law stay. At this early age she adopts the culture that once married, she should dedicate herself serving her in-laws. Hence, whether it is a large extended family or small family, young brides married to migrant men are expected and performed similar duties: taking care of in-laws and other household works.

Sauda (15) did not have a strong desire to continue her religious education. Rather she regarded her education (religious) very lightly, as an insignificant part of life before marriage, similar to what another madrassa goer teen bride Monira (14) did. Similarly, 18-year-old Habiba (looks younger) from the same village as Sauda, does not have any regret or sadness over the discontinuation her madrassa studies.

8.4.3. Teen brides who went to madrassa are least interested in continuing education

An interesting trend is noticeable in cases of Monira (14), Sauda (15) and Habiba (18) and that is, all of them were madrassa going (Religious/Islamic/Arabic school) students, prior to their marriage. Which sheds light on the fact that young women who went to madrassa are more reluctant to continue their study after marriage and do not necessarily have any regrets for stopping their education compared to young brides who went to Bengali schools. For example, Mim (19) and Tahida (19) who went to Bengali schools both mentioned they wished to continue their education even after marriage but were not allowed to do so by their in-laws.

On this note, the difference between madrassa and Bengali medium school is worth mentioning. When village girls go to madrassa it is always female-only madrassa, where they learn Quraan, and other Arabic studies. As it is not a co-education system, the girls do not have the chance to meet or talk to other boys. These madrassas have boarding system (Mamun and Shaon 2018; Debnath and Selim 2009) and hence, girls do not have to commute every day. Whereas, Bengali school going girls have to commute every day to school. Even though, school going girls wear burkha and hijab, their every-day commute to schools still expose them to the gaze of local men on street. And if the school is not female only school, they have to study in mixed schools with fellow male students. Which is most of the time not desirable to the parents of the girl and also to the potential groom and his parents. Hence, madrassa going girls in the villages have a reputation as pure and religious minded, and thus more suitable as marriage materials.
Coming back to the point that girls going to madrassa have least desire to continue their study after marriage. As explained above, girls who go to madrassa are more likely to perceive traditional wife’s duties in the future when they are married. Also, in a religious school context, they are taught about traditional gender roles such as, serving their in-laws and husbands and maintaining strict Islamic dress code. In female madrassas in Pakistan women are taught to believe in ‘women will get married, women will raise children and it will create a norm in the society over time’ (Conway 2011). Specially, in madrasas, everything they learn is in Arabic, where else in Bengali medium schools students learn English, Math, Science, Bengali and other subjects. Undeniably, Bengali medium education is more engaging, skillful (Mamun and Shaon 2018) and enjoyable compared to madrassa or Arabic education which is often monotonous. This can be a key reason behind young brides in this research who went to madrassa did not have any regret for stopping their education.

However, very few scholars have argued that a modernised form of Madrassa (Alia madrassa), where students also learn some marketable skills other than only Arabic studies have been successful to attract female students. Regression analysis of data on enrolment growth rates suggests that the presence of modernized madrassas is strongly associated with the boom in female schooling in Bangladesh (Asadullah and Chaudhury 2009). Yet, particularly in remote villages most of the madrasas are not modernized (Mamun and Shaon 2018) and there is a lack of data how and what those madrasas teaches to its pupils. A quantitative approach looking at the enrolment growth of female students at these ‘modernised madrasas’ cannot prove whether the girls really remained in the institutions and completed their study. My field work data from the remote villages of Bogura district shows girls going to madrassa are more likely to leave their education early compared to fellow girls going to secular or Bengali medium schools. It is evident that the youngest brides (14, 15, and 16-year-old) are the ones who studied in madrassa.

The increasing trend of sending children, particularly female children to madrassa is very much linked to men’s migration. Few researches (Rao and Hossain 2012; Debnath and Selim 2009) have already claim return migrants from Middle-East tend to advocate for madrassa system in rural Bangladesh. In chapter eight, under men’s attitudes towards gender norms, I analyse both rural and sub-urban migrant men’s support for madrassa further.
8.5. Men’s Migration and the Practice of Teen Marriage

I argue that men’s migration certainly does not bring any positive changes either towards reduction of the practice of teen marriage or towards the educational status of teen brides. Previous quantitative research from Bangladesh referring a positive link between men’s migration and increase in female child’s education (Hadi 2001) has disregarded the fact that these migrant men themselves are married to teenage girls whose education has stopped since marriage. Furthermore, due to the lack of qualitative research, what happens once the female children were enrolled in schools (whether they stay in schools or not) has not been mentioned in those researches. Data from my fieldwork reveal even in the migrant families where fathers are migrants, girls are given in marriage at an early age and often to other migrant men.

Chowdhury’s (2004, 251) research from Bangladeshi village includes a migrant man’s statement who said he married his wife when she was eleven because he decided to go abroad, and mature girls lose their ‘good character’ when their husbands go abroad. This concept that young girls will not have strong sexual desire when their husbands are abroad, is pervasive and often one of the key reasons behind migrant men marrying young girls.

On a different note, Rick Docksai’s (2012) research on child marriage in South Asia shows, some girls in their mid-teens themselves want the marriage, as they believe that it will lead them to a better life. This claim does echo with the life perspective of majority of the teen brides I interviewed. To name few such as: Habiba, Sauda, Monira, Mim who all are seemingly satisfied, and not unhappy being teen brides. A lot of research has already mentioned, the importance on female sexual purity, romantic affair and sex before marriage being taboos; are all vital causes for child marriage in South Asia (Chatterjee 2011; Kamal et al. 2014). Yet, such research somehow fails to make the point that girls in their mid-teen do have desires to be in romantic relationships with young men. Since, a girl’s modest conversation to a man who is not a family member, let alone dating, is frowned upon in rural Bangladesh; marriage is only socially accepted and reputable way for a girl to have a romantic partner. However, one may argue, being married to a migrant man does not serve that purpose. But the everyday phone conversation with migrant husband is part of that romantic relationship for them. Many teen and adult brides I interviewed blushed while mentioning that their husbands call them every day.
Often, particularly to the readers from the Western world, the term ‘child or teen marriage’
denotes forced marriage, marital rape, overall an unpleasant event that is part of a culture from
third world countries. When one cannot deny that violence is not involved at all in cases of
child or teen marriage, and it is still the key reason behind young girls’ dropouts from schools
in South Asia; however, it is also true that often girls are not forced into it. Neither it is
reasonable to say that all young brides have traumatic experience after their marriage. For
example, 19-year-old Jannati from Harinmara village was married when she was 13. Her
husband went abroad after three years of their marriage. In her words:

    Jannati: Initially, after marriage I used to stay with my parents for most of the
time. Then, gradually over the time when I started liking them (in-laws and husband),
I started staying with my husband and his family.

    MK: your in-laws or husband never forced you stay with them?

    Jannati: No, they didn’t. Whenever I wanted, I came to stay with my parents.
I was so young.

Monira (14) and Saudua (15), two teen brides shared similar experience, they stay with their
parents, often longer than they stay at their in-laws’ places. Jannati’s story tells us that emotion
and trust are important in her relationship with in-laws and husband; and these do not happen
overnight. Like any other relationship building, these young brides are also given time and not
forced to start performing their new roles right after the day of their marriages. At this point I
turn to Ethel Crowley (2014, 6) as she mentions, ‘we must turn to the study of culture to show
that women who are ostensibly passive often resist patriarchy in many inventive yet practical
ways, as it exists in their own local environment.’ Here, I am not implying that the teen brides
in my research are contesting patriarchy by agreeing to marriage and dropping off form schools.
However, the label of ‘married girl’ does facilitate their personal and social needs such as:
having a romantic partner and reputable status in the community.

In a nutshell, men’s migration does not seem to eradicate the practice of teen marriage for girls
in Bangladesh. It further strengthens it to some extent. In the villages particularly, madrassa
system supported by migrant men further promotes early marriages for female children.
However, similar to the practice of consanguineous marriage (analysed in chapter five), teen
marriage also seems to offer some practical benefits (e.g. lawful courtship, social respect) for
girls as long as the marriage is not forced. Perhaps, the most negative impact of such marriages
is the termination of education for the young brides. This is predominantly common in the villages, as few sub-urban brides of migrant men are able to continue education even after marriage. Education and independent physical mobility for women, have not been facilitated in the remote villages yet, and men’s migration seems to have no influence to bring such positive changes. Rather, it has reinforced ‘respectful’ women’s limited mobility and consequently fewer educational and employment opportunities for women.

De Haas and Van Rooij (2010) mention in their research on men’s migration and women left-behind in rural Morocco that for girls and their mothers, education is today a socially acceptable reason to postpone marriage. Rural left-behind women in Bangladesh are yet to experience such confidence and positive attitude towards education.
Conclusion

This chapter has provided a deeper insight on left-behind wives’ vulnerability to gender-based violence and a particular focus on changes in teen brides’ educational status. In the beginning of the chapter, I focused on left-behind wives’ vulnerability to abusive marriage, stigma related to divorce and harassment threats. This research found that in the villages even in families with migrant men, stigma related divorce is extremely common that women are expected to stay in marriage with abusive in-laws. I argue that migration of men does not challenge such unjust practices towards women in the villages.

Migrants’ wives and daughters are often more vulnerable to male harassment, and shame related to such incidents are widespread. I argue that the fear of gossip and shame related to sexual harassment remain unchallenged in the context of men’s migration. In financially successful migrant households, women have relatively higher security (toilets inside the house). However, this implies women can have security only when they have strong financial and social ties. Therefore, I argue, even the successful migration does not challenge the system of the village as a whole where, being a woman from a poor or unsuccessful migrant household makes her more vulnerable to sexual harassment.

In the latter half of the chapter, I focused on the experience of teen brides married to migrant men. I found that parents of teenage girls often assume, by getting their daughters married to migrant men, daughters would skip traditional wives’ roles and would continue education after marriage. However, this proved to be wrong in all cases in the villages, as teen brides eventually could not skip their duties towards their in-laws, and left education.

I indicated a strong link between men’s migration and madrassa education system. And female madrassa students in the villages are more prone to leave education early compared to Bengali school goer girls. Finally, this research found no positive link between men’s migration and increase in female education. Moreover, my field work data shows in both rural and sub-urban context, a daughter of a migrant father is often married at an early age to another migrant man.
Chapter 9: Men, Migration and Masculinity

Introduction

I begin this chapter depicting my short encounter with a migrant man at Dhaka airport. In December 2017, I am on my way back to UK from Bangladesh after completing my field work. My connecting flight is in Dubai, and hence, I am in the queue with Bangladeshi men (mostly migrant workers in Dubai and other Middle Eastern cities) ready to board. The man in front of me is on the phone with his daughter, saying a loving goodbye:

Please remain as a good daughter to your mother, always listen what she tells you to do. Mayer kotha shuno. And never leave the house without wearing Burkha. Burkha sara ghor theke baraiba na.

I briefly talked to him. He is in his late 40s, from Commilla district and due to its distance from Dhaka, his family could not come to see him off at Dhaka airport. The man is wearing modern or Western clothing, does not have beard or other visible Islamic features. This apparent contradiction between the way he speaks to his daughter, and his own appearance and willingness to speak to a female stranger, is a central theme of this chapter.

In this chapter I focus on my third sub research question. I analyse migrant men’s views on gender norms and whether living abroad has prompted any changes on existing culture. My findings suggest migrant men from the village strongly advocate female modesty and madrassa education, resulting in limited physical mobility for women. I argue that differences between destination countries, play hardly any role in shaping migrant men’s gender norms accordingly. For example, returnees from both Saudi Arabia and Malaysia have similar attitudes towards women’s physical mobility. However, suburban men value female education, unlike their village counterparts.

I argue migrant men from the village use ‘Islam’ to justify women’s roles at home, and further strengthen hegemonic masculinity. The Saudi version of female modesty appears as popular Islamic tradition among majority of the migrant men.

Finally, I argue, migration induced masculine identity is not simple, neither one-dimensional. Rather it has different dimensions such as: responsible and ‘religious’, which further strengthen the hegemonic masculinity.
9.1. Men’s Advocacy for ‘Female Modesty’ and Madrassa

Men from the villages say they prefer to send their daughters to female Madrassas and get them married early for these acts will enable the parents of the daughters to earn sawaab\(^{20}\). The men believe if someone raises a modest daughter\(^{21}\), he is bound for heaven after death. Whether this belief is purely Islamic or local cultural practice can be open to debate, but my research participants who identify themselves as Muslims believe it. One such example is 45-year-old return migrant Mostak Ahmed from Harinmara village. In his words:

See, I care for my son and daughter a lot. Our religion is Islam. It requires women to maintain Purdah. That is why I send my daughter to female Madrassa. If I had sent her to a non-Islamic (Bengali medium) school where boys also study, this would be a sin. But if she stays in religious school and maintains her modest character, Allah will forgive any sins had I ever committed!

A lot of the migrant men from the village (returnees as well as those who are on leave) seem to agree with this view. 32-year-old Imdadul Hauque currently on leave from Saudi Arabia said, as a villager he believes the honour of a girl is in marriage and her studying in Madrassa. He also believes educated people from town (pointing at myself) can rightly disagree, but as a villager he is proud of his belief. He says:

We are uneducated village people. We believe it is better to make our girls leave the house early (get them married early) even when they are not adult. This is a village custom. You educated people do not need to agree with us.

32-year-old Delwar (Saudi return) strongly mention women in his family are not allowed to continue education after marriage.

Spiritual attainments are as important as material goals in rural Bangladesh and villagers think that happiness lies in achieving harmony between these measures of wealth (Ahmed 2008). Rural men and women believe that peace in the household and being able to walk with dignity is as important as financial security (Ahmed 2008). Poor people all over the world feel that

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\(^{20}\) Sawaab is an Arabic term meaning reward, specifically in the context of Islamic world view rewards that one gets in afterlife on the basis of good deeds done in world life.

\(^{21}\) Modest daughter in this context is someone who wears burkha or hijab, does not mix with boys, does not have romantic affair before marriage.
dignity is basic to their existence (Narayan et al. 2000). Raising a ‘modest daughter’ and sending children to madrassa, fulfil that spiritual goal for the migrant men. Female ‘modesty’ is a key indicator for such dignity.

Raising a ‘modest’ or pious daughter is so crucial that one migrant who without a daughter was prepared to adopt a female child and send her to Madrassa. The next example is of such man, a returnee from Saudi, 44-year-old Sikandar Ali from Harinmara village. He says:

I have two sons. I went abroad when the younger one was ten. Then, after coming back I told my wife if we can have a daughter it would be great. There was a risk of having another son in biological way. So, I thought if we can find a beautiful baby girl from a poor household it would be great. I went abroad again. That time my wife brought a five-month-old girl from Uttarpura (another village). I told my wife to contact the Member or aged/respected people from that village as witness, to sign a paper that says we are adopting this baby. The paperwork costed 300taka.22 She (the adopted daughter) studies at standard three now. I will send her to madrassa soon. Niot korsi Madrassa porabo. I made a vow that I will have a daughter and send her to madrassa, make her a proper Muslim. I will be sending her to madrassa for the sake of a better afterlife.

In rural Bangladesh, such attitudes can be considered as significant motive for preferring a female child. In contrast, in other Asian countries including India, selective abortion of female foetuses is very common (Pison 2004; Sharma 2013). However, it should also be considered that Sikandar’s (44) preference for a girl child is strong because he already has two sons. It cannot be claimed that the treatment towards male and female children is equal in this case.

In chapter five, I discussed migrant men’s ‘religious’ reasons for son-preference and how it degrades female child’s status in the family. While it is usual for the migrant men to mention they want both their male and female children to attend Madrassa, a few mentions they only want madrassa education for their daughters and not for their sons. For example, the same Imdadul Hauque (32) from the village who advocated for madrassa and early marriage for girls, does not want to send his son to madrassa. When I asked him to explain the reason, he says:

I will not send my son to madrassa. The main reason is, I will try my best to push my son forward. If he can at least graduate high school, he can take his own

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22 300taka/BDT is equivalent to £3 or £2.73 GBP.
decision after that whether he would continue study or like to go abroad like myself. He can take that decision himself if he at least graduates high school.

However, as mentioned above, *Imdadul* (32) does not wish the same for his daughter as it is against village customs. He recognizes the potential in non-religious school, but only seeks such opportunities for his son and not for his daughter.

Rao and Hossian (2012) observe that madrassa is popular in rural Bangladesh because Quranic learning in Arabic is seen as increasing familiarity with the language, enabling boys to migrate to the Gulf. However, my male interviewees would disagree. They explain that they send their children (both male and female) to madrassa primarily for religious purposes and not for worldly rewards or benefits. I asked 28-year-old *Enamul*, a returnee from Oman, if learning Arabic for migration is the reason behind sending boys to madrassa. He replies:

No. If you say so, then we are thinking about life in this world. The main reason behind sending them to madrassa, is to make our boys religious. *Alem banabo*. Do you think I will send my child to Gulf for hard life? No. My children will stay in this country.

In a nutshell, the majority of the migrant men from the villages prefer sending their children to madrassa for religious rewards. While few of them mention sending their sons to Bengali school in preference to madrassa for better career prospects, for daughters they unanimously prefer madrassa. This highlights the fact that when some migrants consider positive changes (sending boys to Bengali schools, instead of sending to madrassa) they prefer it for their sons, and daughters lag behind.

9.1.1. *Sub-urban migrants’ views differ on female education*

In contrast, unlike the village men almost all the migrant men from sub-urban *Munshiganj* emphasised female education in Bengali medium schools. Although, they (sub-urban men) too, are reluctant to criticise the madrassa system. Two sub-urban return migrants, 54-year-old *Jabbar Ali* and 44-year-old *Mozammel* explain:

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23 Madrassa educated boy can perform father’s funeral, enabling the father heaven after death. Madrassa educated girl keeps ‘modest character’, enabling the parents heaven after death.
Of course, we want our daughters to be educated. People who go abroad, even if they are uneducated, they want their children to be fully educated. We understand very well that how important education is. Girls are eager to study, boys are not.

This statement is strikingly different from the village man Imadadul’s (32) view, who said for uneducated village people girl’s marriage is more important than her education. While marriage is still highly important for sub-urban families, the emphasis on female education is noteworthy.

Sub-urban men also highlight that their daughters are more willing to study than their sons. Similar results are also found in Pakistan (Farooq and Javed 2009) and in other research on Bangladesh (Debnath and Selim 2009) which suggest that in migrant households, male children have the least interest in continuing education. Sub-urban men in this research mention their full support for their daughters’ schooling, unlike the majority of the men from the villages.

Many wives of the sub-urban migrants in this research also mention that they hire home tutors for their children, unlike families from the villages. Hiring a tutor for children is a widespread practice in the urban middle class in Bangladesh (Sultan Ahmed and Bould 2004). For sub-urban left-behind families to hire a tutor is a significant development. It also indicates that sub-urban families put more emphasis on educating their children and have the means to do so. Village families, on the other hand, note that the daily commute to school is a problem (especially for a female child/teen) which is why they prefer boarding madrassa for their children, in addition to their religious reasons.
9.2. Admiration towards Saudi Arabia

Figure 9.1. Destination countries of the male interviewees in this study.

Saudi Arabia appears as most common destination among the 16 migrant men (eleven from the village and five from sub-urban) I interviewed for this study. Out of 16, seven men went to Saudi Arabia (five village men and two sub-urban men). UAE, Singapore and Malaysia are next most popular destinations. The village men explained that to go to Middle-Eastern countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, no education is required, and the process is done by the brokers (often through fake paper works). Whereas, to go to countries like Singapore, a high school degree is the minimum requirement and the process is done through official or legal channels. Hence, the majority of the uneducated villagers opt for Middle-Eastern countries, particularly Saudi Arabia. Villagers also prefer Saudi Arabia for ‘religious’ reasons.

Migrant men in general highly speak of Saudi Arabia as destination country. Imdadul Hauque (32) mentioned, his parents sent him to Saudi Arabia because it is the home of Allah and prophets. According to him Arabs are the real Muslims, Dekha Muslims, who have seen Allah and prophets with their own eyes, whereas Bengalis are Shuna Muslims who became Muslims after hearing about Islam from other Islamic preachers. He says:
A lot of women also go to mosque in Saudi Arabia. In Bangladesh not as much men go to the mosque, as much women go to mosques in Saudi. This is a shame! Arabs really respect prayers. They are really good. Even children go to mosque there.

_Sikandar Ali_ (44) mentions he favoured Saudi Arabia over other countries for a different reason. He says:

First of all, Saudi is better because it is the country of the prophet. But it is also very good for daily physical movement. _Cholaferar jonno valo._ It is because in other countries women freely move around. See, men do not have chance to talk to women in Saudi. That is why it is really good. In Malaysia women roam around openly. In Saudi, one cannot get to experience such things.

Here _Sikandar_ (44), mainly focusing on the fact that in Saudi it is easy for men not to be sexually provoked as women do not openly move around. And thus, one can maintain one’s ‘good character’ in Saudi, according to him. This ‘good character’ also refers to be a proper family man who is not wasted in alcohol or women, as in Saudi Arabia, one cannot indulge himself in such ‘bad habits’. As Khalad (2017) found in the Netherlands, Bangladeshi migrant men negotiate their marginalised masculinity by stressing their own good manners, family dedication along with breadwinner role, where they perceive themselves better than white Dutch men and other migrant men.

**9.2.1. Differences between destination countries barely matter in shaping migrant men’s attitudes**

As discussed in previous chapters, men’s migration to certain countries (e.g. Saudi Arabia) means that conservative values are further reinforced in the men’s home country (Ferrant and Tuccio 2015; Tuccio and Wahba 2018); and Bangladeshi men’s migration to the Middle-East promotes _Madrassa_ and _Burkha or hijab_ for women in Bangladesh (Rao and Hossain 2012; Debnath and Selim 2009; Hussain 2010; Siddiqi 2006). Hence, one can assume men’s migration to less conservative countries like Malaysia and Singapore might challenge already existent conservative norms in the home country. However, this does not seem to be the case, as village men who migrate to Malaysia tend to have similar attitudes towards female ‘modesty’ and madrassa as those who migrate to Saudi Arabia. For example, a 32-year-old returnee from Malaysia, unmarried man _Abu Raihan_ from the village, mentions:
Madrassa is better. *Banglai te purdah nai*. There is no Purdah in Bengali medium. For future wife, I would prefer someone who studied in Arabic line (*madrassa*). But she must have some general knowledge so she can teach children. Everyone has to maintain their own culture. If we follow our Islamic culture, then women should stay inside the house. If she maintains *Purdah*, she can have education then!

36-year-old *Uzzal* from *Harinmara* village, currently on leave from Malaysia claims:

For women, Bangladesh is much better than Malaysia. *Mane, ekhane ‘meyera valo’!* Bangladeshi women have ‘good character’. Women have too much freedom in Malaysia. They can do whatever they want, there!!

A 35-year-old sub-urban man, Jamil, a returnee from Singapore, also defended *madrassa*. He says:

I want to send my son to *madrassa* too. If I send my son to *madrassa* he will read Quran definitely. If I die and my son can’t even pray for me, that’s not a good thing. Before, in Bengali schools Islamic study was mandatory. But now the government has made it optional! (Jamil is frustrated/angry at government).

The above accounts show that the differences between destination countries hardly influence migrant men’s inbred attitudes or beliefs towards gender and ‘religious’ roles.

Young men’s migration to the Middle-East, however, can indeed encourage them to harbour ‘conservative’ norms towards female ‘modesty’. One such example is of a young man 20-year-old *Atiqur Rahman* from *Harinmara* village, who mentioned that he has been working in Qatar for the last four years. My conversation with him ran as follows,

Atiqur: Qatari women need to wear *burkha* if they come out of the house. The government there, has made this a rule for Muslim women.

MK: I see, but in Bangladesh wearing *burkha* is not mandatory. What do you think about this mandatory rule in Qatar?

Atiqur: This is a really good rule.

MK: Good?
Atiqur: Yes. *burkha* is better because it is *Purdah*. It is mentioned in Quran and *Hadith*\(^{24}\). But in Bangladesh wearing *burkha* has not been established as a mandatory rule. In Bangladesh, people will not follow this rule, because it has Hindu population as well. (Atiqur sounds slightly frustrated).

It is worth mentioning here that *Atiqur* (20) does not have a beard\(^{25}\) nor does he wear any Islamic or Arab dress. At time of the interview, he was wearing traditional Bengali wear *Lungi*\(^{26}\). He advocates for mandatory *burkha* rules for women in Bangladesh and is seemingly dissatisfied at the fact that it is difficult to make this a mandatory rule because Bangladesh has a minority Hindu population.

### 9.3. Abusive or Alternative Masculinities?

Migrant men like *Atiqur* (20) and *Abu Raihan* (32) who bring or use Islam to justify limitations on women’s physical mobility or *Purdah*, can be understood as advocates of a patriarchal interpretation of Islam, as Bangladeshi scholar Fauzia Ahmed (2014) has defined it. Patriarchal Islamicists contend that in Islam, peace in the household is contingent upon women staying at home (Ahmed 2014). Ahmed (2008) argues, hegemonic masculinity is in crisis in Bangladesh. Cleaver (2002) observes that social, economic and political development, which has gender equality at its core, threatens the established masculine identity. Men like *Atiqur* (20) and *Abu Raihan* (32), therefore, use patriarchal interpretations of Islam in desperation (Ahmed 2008).

NGOs’ activity related women’s movement, female enrolment in schools, all have threatened men’s space in rural community. Not surprisingly, this masculinity feels that its dominance must be protected at all costs (Ahmed 2008). Today, abusive masculinity uses Islam as the last resort, as a way of saying ‘shut up’ to those who deviate, and as a way of avoiding their own inner contradictions (Ahmed 2008). In the context of my data, such masculinities are on the rise among the young migrant men, whether the migration is to a strict Islamic country such as Saudi Arabia or comparatively less rigid Islamic country like Malaysia. The use or misuse of Islam to justify women’s role at home, appears as popular belief among the migrant men from the village.

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\(^{24}\) *Hadith* is a collection of traditions containing sayings of the prophet Muhammad which, with accounts of his daily practice (the *Sunna*), constitute the major source of guidance for Muslims apart from the Quran.

\(^{25}\) Muslim men are encouraged to grow beard as an indicator of followers of Islam.

\(^{26}\) *Lungi* is a sarong, traditional garment for men worn by the waist in Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan etc.
One probable reason behind this is lack of proper education or unwillingness towards continue in education. As a progressive-minded middle-aged man from Harinmara village states:

Migration has brought financial success. But we lag behind in education because of migration. Young boys are more eager to earn money through migration and care less about getting educated. And for girls, of course marriage means the end of their education.

Hence, with little education, migration-induced money or wealth is unlikely to bring transformative changes regarding gender roles.

However, Rao and Hossain (2012) have a different explanation behind such masculinities among migrant men from rural Bangladesh. They argue for a migration-induced masculinity, alternative to educated masculinity for rural men which does not have to be negative. Men represent themselves as more successful than they probably are; hiding the drudgery, exploitation and exhaustion, they present themselves as savvy, knowledgeable, and adept (Rao and Hossain 2012). The sense of degradation felt at the worksite is compensated through a carefully constructed positive self-identity at home and a strategic representation of their manly ability to survive (Rao and Hossain 2012). It is supported by re-creation of a discourse of femininity revolving around the home and reproduction rather than the workplace (Rao and Hossain 2012).

Indeed, in South Asia, masculinities are constituted in relation to others: their wives and children, wider kin, and whole neighbourhoods with stances shaped to build both dignity and economic security (Chopra et al. 2004). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, 844) claim that the hegemonic idea of maleness is also related to femininity. The fact that women’s practices and beliefs, which are shaped by patriarchal norms also reproduce the ideal norms of what can be called as men’s work and what can be called as women’s work (Khalad 2017).

As discussed in chapter one, being exposed to an unfriendly environment abroad, labour migrants rely on their home and women’s faithfulness (Kibria 2008; Sangari 2002; Chopra et al. 2004). This is a key reason behind migrant men’s insistence on keeping their wives at home. The men I interviewed seem proud to share their experience of living and working abroad, and rarely mention the ill-treatment they received in the gulf. However, 30-year-old Abu Said acknowledges that:
People in Dubai think really highly of themselves. So proud and rude. We Bengalis are always treated like beggars. They don’t treat us well. There are few who good towards us.

32-year-old Delwar Hossain explained that he was never allowed inside his employer’s place in Saudi Arabia, except when called by the boss when he needed someone to change an old carpet in the house.

A few migrant men were slightly hesitant or ashamed to talk about their work abroad. For example, sub-urban Jamil (35) who worked in construction in Singapore, was apparently ashamed to describe his role as a construction worker and kept emphasising that his work is related to field engineering. Similarly, 45-year-old Mostak who emphasised that he worked in a Pharmacy, was unwilling to admit that he was only a helper or cleaner at medicine or drug store in Saudi Arabia. Similar to Rao and Hossain (2012) findings, these men also seem to exaggerate their pleasant experiences abroad, hiding the humiliation they encountered there. Mostak Ahmed (45) recalls one such pleasant experience and proudly shares it:

My experience is that when one goes abroad his international knowledge increases. One can talk to people from different countries while abroad, and also one can learn about new moral values. Bibek bare. So many new experiences. For example, once I asked a British lady you will come from where? The woman replied very shortly, she only said UK. I know English very well, and yet I got confused. She could say I come from United Kingdom. But she only said UK. That day I realized, actually in English language one must answer in few words. Now this is great learning that I learnt.

Mostak Ahmed has a BA degree and slightly more educated compared to other men from the village. He mentions that one can learn a different culture while abroad. Yet, as noted above, he considers that by getting his daughter married early or by raising a ‘modest’ daughter he is securing a place in heaven after death. This ultimately implies, no matter how proud men are of their abroad experience, upon return they do not challenge the village or ‘religious’ customs. Rather, they often reinforce it.

The literature (Boyd 1989; Spilimbergo 2009; Hadi 2001) that claims that migrants bring progressive values from destination countries to their home countries, does not reflect the

27 The participant used that form of English.
reality of unskilled labour migrants’ experiences. My data echoes more with scholars such as Erman (2001) who noted that patriarchy reproduces itself in the lives of migrants. Circular migration of unskilled labour migrants hardly offers any opportunities for migrant men to be engaged in educational or positive cultural achievements from their destination countries.

9.4. Responsible, ‘Religious’ and Hegemonic Masculinity

Upon return, a migrant will invest the money in building a new house or buying land, once the debts he took on while going abroad are paid off. One significant investment of remittances is in an unmarried sister’s marriage. A lot of return migrants in the villages use the phrase ‘bonok bia disi’ which translates as ‘I got my sister married’. Although, participants hardly mentioned dowry, generally even in dowry-less marriages there are other expenses such as shopping, decoration of the house, and wedding feast. A migrant brother takes pride in financing such arrangements. This also enables him a responsible masculine identity. In Bangladesh, generally in all classes, a brother gets married or settles down after a sister’s marriage or after making her settled first.

Hence, to provide the definition of a distinct migration induced masculine identity is difficult. Inequality in rural Bangladesh translates into daily humiliation and disrespect (Ahmed 2008). Being exploited both in home and abroad, migrant men cling even more strongly to traditional and ‘religious’ customs, upon their return. Particularly the village migrants become devout and express their gratitude to Allah for their hard-earned money and new wealth derived from their migration. Young migrant men use Islam to justify women’s role at home, even when those men do not know how to read Quran. Thus, the migrant men reinforce the already existent patriarchal norm with a new tool that is ‘in the name of Islam’.

Connell (1998, 5) defines hegemonic masculinity as a set of ideas and practices that are perceived as ideal for all men. In recent studies, the idea of hegemonic masculinity has become important for the understanding of migrant men’s life experience (Khalad 2017). However, migrant men may have very limited possibilities to exert any kind of dominance towards both women and men of the host society, even when they hold power over women in their own family or community (Khalad 2017, 12). Hence, I argue, when men cannot exercise such power

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28 Dowry is an amount of property or money brought by a bride to her husband on their marriage.

29 In Bangladesh, a girl’s settled status refers to her successful marriage.
in host countries, back home evidently they do not want to lose such powerful status over
women. The exploitation of their economically poor status (both in home and abroad) and the
loss of hegemonic masculine power in the destination countries, further encourage migrant men
to reinforce patriarchal norms upon their return.

9.5. A ‘Good Husband or Man’ Who Resists Patriarchy

In the context of rural Bangladesh, Ahmed (2014) presents some characteristics that women in
her research considered a good husband should possess. Some such characteristics are
understanding a wife’s need for rest, joint decision making, willingness to put property in the
wife’s name, entrusting the wife with physical mobility, and termination of domestic violence
(Ahmed 2014, 199). Some of such features in migrant husbands are recognizable in sub-urban
left-behind wives’ narratives, in this research. In chapter five, I mentioned suburban Nasima’s
(37) experience. She proudly explains that all the properties her husband bought are in her
name. One suburban wife also mentions that her migrant husband understands she needs rest
after looking after the children and does not mind if she cannot pick up his phone on time. In
the previous chapters, it is also discussed how suburban women possess greater decision-
making and physical mobility power.

Such descriptions of a husband’s admirable character are practically absent in village left-
behind wives’ narratives. However, as already discussed in chapter five, village women by
nature are shy to talk about husbands or conjugal life to an outsider like myself. And not to
mention the good character of their husband does not necessarily indicate their husband lacks
such qualities.

Fauzia Ahmed (2008) claims that not all rural Bangladeshi men support patriarchy, but some
even resist it. She calls for research on such high minded men who resist patriarchy to change
other men and to ally with women in their efforts to gain agency (Ahmed 2008). I find only
two such high minded or progressive men among my participants from the village. One of them
is 34-year-old Shibbir Ahmed, returned from Singapore. In response to my question whether
his stay abroad brought any positive changes to women’s status in his family, he says:

You see our village culture is very bad. Bou k Golam vabe. Men here treat their wives like servants. People here don’t understand that a married woman can also have freedom, or she can still prefer socialising with others than her in-laws. Women here are deprived of everything. Man does not mind taking
financial help from his wife’s parents. And yet the wife has no say at her in-law’s. Her opinion is never asked in anything. I treat my wife well, because I understand this is a problem, not everyone does.

Shibbir (34) empathises that this situation of women in the village is unlikely to change. Because the trend of migration has encouraged men to leave schools early, and without proper education, positive changes in women’s role are unlikely to occur.

Among the very few men who disagree with women’s Purdah practice in Saudi Arabia is 36-year-old Ziaur Rahman from the village Harinmara. He mentions in Saudi Arabia a wife is not allowed to speak with her brother-in-law when her husband is not around. And according to him, this is a really strict rule. However, he believes that in terms of women’s freedom Bangladesh is better, but in terms of Islam, Saudi Arabia is better for women. This again reveals that the Saudi version of Islam or ‘Purdah’ for women seems popular among migrant men. Both Shibbir (34) and Ziaur (36) mention that they send their daughters to Bengali schools and not to madrassa.

In terms of changes in everyday gender norms, such as men’s involvement in cooking or cleaning or other duties traditionally performed by women, there is no evidence from the study participants. For cultural reasons, it was also difficult for me to ask the men directly if they help their wife in the kitchen or in cleaning. Such questions would have sounded inappropriate or potentially humiliating. In the description of their daily routine such activities are not included. Only Shibbir mentions he makes instant noodles sometimes, a food habit from Singapore he could not leave behind. Forty-two -year-old suburban Rezaul Ahmed who returned from Saudi Arabia mentions that he is buying his wife washing machine. This can reduce his wife’s challenging work and also showcase his modern status in the community. Here, Shibbir and Rezaul represents what Ahmed (2008) describes as progressive minded men.

Ahmed (2008) argues that both scholarship and policies should focus on such men who can influence both men and women to challenge patriarchal practices that disadvantage women. It is also worth highlighting that Shibbir and Rezaul are a small minority in my data. It is true that educational and regional background have an influence on how these migrant men treat women in their family. Overall, my data has shown that labour migration has little impact on bringing transformative changes in patriarchal behaviour among men.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I discuss migrant men’s experience abroad and how such experiences shape their gender norms back home. I conclude that migrant men particularly from the village, strongly support female ‘modesty’ and the madrassa education system which promotes early marriage and hinders female education or empowerment. When sub-urban migrants refuse to challenge the madrassa system for religious reasons, they are, however, more supportive of female education, unlike the village men.

Contrary to the previous studies, my data show that differences between destination countries do not matter much in shaping or changing migrant men’s views on gender norms. Even though Saudi Arabia emerges as a popular destination (for religious reasons and lower education requirements) someone who migrates to Malaysia comes back with similar beliefs to those of a Saudi returnee. This ultimately highlights the fact that low-skilled labourers, regardless their different destination countries (more conservative or less conservative), upon return hold on to their inbred traditional values regarding gender norms. However, I argue that the Saudi version of Islam regarding women’s purdah and stay-home roles are highly appreciated among the Saudi-return migrant men.

I argue that migration offers men the possibility to build a multi-dimensional masculine identity rather than a single one. Migration induced money enable him to perform financial responsibilities as traditional bread earner. I argue migrant men reinforce ‘religious’ roles for women to keep men’s hegemonic masculinity alive.
Chapter 10: Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

I started this research to explore the impact of men’s labour migration on their left-behind wives. This qualitative study aims to contribute to an understanding of gender relations in Bangladesh in the milieu of such gender selective migration. I was motivated by part by my personal experience with a few wives of the labour migrants and the lack of qualitative research on this phenomenon in Bangladesh. In this concluding chapter, I return to my research questions and summarize my answers to them, drawing on both the literature review in Chapters two to four and my data presented in Chapters six to nine. I also highlight the key contributions or cutting edge of this research, and limitations of my thesis and suggest directions for future research.

I highlight some of the key findings from the analysis chapters and how they address the sub research questions in section 10.1. I identify three key contributions from this research in the conclusion (section 10.2). Finally, there are concluding reflections with some recommendations for further research in section 10.3.

10.1. Discussion: Addressing the research questions

The central theme of this research was the impact of men’s migration on the everyday lives of their left-behind wives and gender norms in Bangladesh. This was assessed though exploring the answers to the sub research questions addressed below.

Both Chapter six and Seven explore left-behind wives’ relationships with their in-laws and hence, they provide answers to my first sub research question: “in what ways do left-behind women’s relations with extended family affect their physical mobility and decision-making power?” Chapter six particularly focuses on the living arrangements of the wives, kinship culture and traditional practices such as cousin marriage and son preference. Chapter Six primarily explores wives’ relations with in-laws, the role of Burkha in their physical mobility, and relations with migrant husbands through everyday phone conversation. Overall, the analysis from these two chapters echoes previous findings from Nepal (Gartaula et al. 2012) and India (Datta and Mishra 2012) that wives living with in-laws experience low levels of physical autonomy and decision-making power. This is especially evident when considering differences between wives living in rural villages and urban areas in my research; one of the
reasons that village wives are relatively more restricted in undertaking activities outside the home is that they live with their in-laws while sub-urban wives do not. A key contribution of my research to the existing literature on left-behind is that there is a life cycle of left-behind wives in some regions. I have shown and argued that far from being challenged by men’s migration, the patrilocal culture in the villages has recreated the power structure between two generations of women whose husbands have both been labour migrants. The power dynamic between mothers and daughters-in-law (Das Gupta 1995; Kandiyoti 1988; Chowdhury 2009; Mason 1986) discussed in the literature review in Chapter three, continues to exist, since a young left-behind wife only achieves a powerful status when she herself turns into a mother in-law of another left-behind wife. My findings thus, adds to the literature on the life cycle of women in the patriarchal context of South Asia. While it is also common for a suburban wife to have both her husband and father-in-law as migrants, the power relation with mother-in-law is uncommon due the changes in patrilocal culture in suburban areas. Data analysed in chapter six also suggest that the village left-behind wives exercise their agency through cousin marriage and by facilitating marriage of natal family members into in-law’s family (e.g. Habiba’s mother). Marrying close relatives offer women additional supports and this is evident both in rural and sub-urban contexts.

The concept of ‘respectable women’ Vodro Mohila and the impact of religious ‘modernity’ expressed in adoption of the Burkha for the wives differ remarkably between the village and suburban contexts. Even though the village wives stay at the home of their in-laws, they entirely depend on their natal male kin’s support for daily necessities such as shopping for grocery and clothing and visiting the natal house. This support from the ‘father-like uncle or brothers’ is essential for the village left-behind wives since a ‘respectable wife’s’ physical mobility outside of the house is discouraged. However, the village wives do not recognize this greater supervision as repressive; they rather depict it as their natal kin’s enhanced consideration of their needs while their husbands are away. These findings challenge previous research (e.g. Dyson and Moore 1983) that women are cut off from natal supports once married. Yet, this reliance inevitably offers these males who are not husbands or fathers to these women, a dominant status over the women. David Strohl (2019, 35) reflects on ‘protection’ in South Asia as, ‘not only ensuring a woman’s physical security, but also curtailing her freedom, restricting or monitoring her mobility, and ensuring her chastity’. Here, protecting a sister or daughter’s reputation who is married to a migrant man becomes vital for natal male family members. The
data suggest that rural left-behind wives experience additional pressure to maintain their ‘respectable’ status.

On the other hand, suburban wives step out from their houses every day to do grocery or take the children to schools. Children in the villages mainly stay in boarding Madrassas or go to schools by themselves; they do not have to be escorted by their mothers. This highlights that restrictions on wives’ physical mobility are specific to the villages, while suburban wives are free from such restrictions. In general, women’s physical movement outside of the house is not frowned upon in suburban Munshiganj as it is in the villages of Bogura. As a result, suburban wives can take full advantage of the Burkha which facilities their mobility in the public space. For village wives, the practice of Burkha does not serve the purpose of physical mobility since their movement outside of the home is very rare in day-to-day life.

Yet, the Burkha serves as a symbol of ‘modern’ Muslim identity for both the village and suburban wives. As discussed in Chapter Three, the participants in my research embrace the Burkha as it signposts their ‘respectable modern’ Muslim women status. In the light of the analysis in Chapter seven, I argue that this identity formation of ‘modern’ Muslim wives through the practice of Burkha does not translate into significant gains in physical autonomy or decision-making power for left-behind women. First, migrant husbands abroad often exert pressure on left-behind women (in both suburban and rural settings) to wear the Burkha through daily phone conversations. This finding is consistent with previous research in Armenia and Guatemala that shows migrant husbands controlling their left-behind wives through telephone conversations (Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007; Mahler 2001). Secondly, the practice of Burkha does not mitigate the power of other respectability criteria to which women must align in society. Consider, for instance, 32-year-old suburban wife Aklima’s experience running a salon which helps her family survive when her husband cannot send money from abroad. Although getting involved in income generating activities again represents a level of autonomy that is unimaginable for the village wives, it is notable that Aklima is careful to describe the nature of her work as a ‘female only’ salon to signpost its ‘respectability’. This suggests even suburban wives are pressured to avoid any occupations or activities that require interactions with men. One can imagine then that if income-generating activities serving female clients only are not widely available in a community, the wives of economically unsuccessful migrants may be at vulnerable positions. In such circumstances, their dependence on support from extended families may be greater as a result.
In the villages, there were signs of economically successful migrant households but the rise in financial standing did not appear to have major impacts on women’s status or gender relations in the household. While left-behind wives expressed satisfaction with financial security and ability to afford comforts like elaborate furniture, newly built house structures, and tile fitted toilets, they described the same restrictions on mobility and decision-making power that exist for wives in relatively unsuccessful migrant households. Conflicts between mothers and daughters-in-law did appear to be less prominent in economically successful migrant households, though mothers-in-law continued to have a dominant status over daughters-in-law.

In Chapter Eight, I answer my second sub research question ‘Does women’s vulnerability to gender-based violence change when their husbands migrate? And do teen brides face particular challenges?’ My findings suggest left-behind women are often more vulnerable to gender-based violence, and early marriage for teen girls persists in migrant households in both rural and sub-urban contexts. Stigma attached to divorce prevents women from leaving the homes of abusive in-laws (e.g. rural wife Rahela’s daughter’s case). Shame associated with harassment from local men promotes early marriage for migrants’ daughters (e.g. sub-urban wife Nasima’s daughter) especially in the absence of a father figure. I acknowledge although these are wider social problems in Bangladesh, left-behind women face these at a greater extent. ‘Married girls attract less unwanted attention’ is a view shared by many participants, reflecting the reality for many young girls that marriage is often considered the only solution to protect them from sexual harassment threats and to preserve their family’s honour. This research challenges previous findings by Hadi (2001) that men’s migration is positively linked to female education in Bangladesh. Once married, young brides in the villages are usually required to stop their education and to learn the skills of housewife (e.g. helping mothers-in-law with cooking and cleaning). I argue that previous quantitative research has overlooked the fact that migrant men are often married to young women whose education is stopped for good, once married. While a few sub-urban young wives in my study were able to continue education after marriage, these represented special cases such as being married to a cousin or having an understanding husband who gave permission for his wife to go to school or college.

It was evident that in migrant households that are less economically successful, left-behind wives can be more vulnerable to sexual harassment threats. For 24-year-old Sathi who does not have a tile fitted toilet inside her house as affluent migrant households do, the fear of getting molested by her stalkers in the dark was preventing her from using the toilet at night. This shows that financial security resulting from men’s successful migration can offer some
practical benefits for left-behind women. Beyond this however, there was no evidence to suggest that a culture of men’s migration has any effects on social norms pertinent to sexual harassment and violence.

Finally, I address my third sub research question ‘To what extent does men’s migration change their attitudes about gender roles?’ in Chapter Nine. I find that migrant men’s tendency to promote ‘female modesty’ hinders educational opportunities for their daughters in the villages. With the exception of two cases, the migrant men interviewed in the villages strongly advocated for madrassa schooling for their daughters to maintain the ‘purity’\(^\text{30}\) of character, as well as early marriages for the daughters. Raising a ‘modest daughter’ is often thought to ensure heaven after death for the father and thus leads to young girls being unable to continue their education. It was clear that financial insecurity was not the primary motivation for the village migrants holding girls out of school, as some of them were willing to send their sons to school but not their daughters. Migrant men in the villages clearly articulated that ‘married status’ is more important than education for their daughters. In contrast, the suburban migrant men were much more likely to express full support for their daughters’ education, even stating that girls are more eager to study than boys.

Unlike a few recent studies (Ferrant and Tuccio 2015; Tuccio and Wahba 2018) that conclude that men’s migration to socially conservative countries (e.g. Saudi Arabia) reinforces conservative norms in their home countries, my research does not find that differences between destination countries mediate migrant men’s attitudes on gender issues. The migrant men in my study held similar opinions advocating for female ‘modesty’ and madrassa education regardless of where they had worked. I argue in Chapter Nine that low skilled labour migrants are unable to transfer progressive values from their destination countries, since they are hardly offered any opportunity to engage in ‘progressive’ culture of the host societies. Thus, my research departs from some studies (Boyd 1989; Spilmimbergo 2009; Hadi 2001) that have claimed a positive connection between migration and eroding ‘backward’ norms in the sending countries. I further argue that i) exploitation of migrant men’s poor economic status (both at home and abroad) and ii) loss of hegemonic masculine power in the host countries act to strengthen patriarchal norms upon men’s return to their home country.

\(^{30}\) Pure character of a girl refers to not studying in co-education system with boys, and no romantic affair before marriage.
It is worth noting, however, that one particular migrant destination, Saudi Arabia, may play a role in helping reinforce local patriarchal norms. The Saudi interpretation of Islam, which includes women maintaining strict *Purdah*, was well-known and highly regarded among returned male migrants. Their desire for their wives and daughters to practice *Burkha* could thus arise from a combination of their exposure to Saudi customs and their hegemonic masculinity, as the practice of *Burkha* serves as an instrument for men to exercise the control over women which they have always wanted. In the villages, migrant men’s advocacy for female ‘modesty’ and limited physical mobility is consistent with this desire for control. I have argued in this thesis that labour migration has provided the men a new medium of control, which is ‘the use of Islam’ to further subjugate women in Bangladesh.

10.2. Conclusion: Key Contributions

10.2.1. Endorsing Women’s ‘Stay at Home Roles’

I have shown in this thesis that husbands’ migration creates a ‘respected’ status for these wives, which may not seem empowering to an outsider like myself but is ultimately accepted by the wives themselves. Gender relations are constructed by both men and women, although not in circumstances of women’s choosing. In her Bangladeshi village study, Sarah White (1992, 79) warns against reproducing the assumption that ‘women’s participation in activities outside the homestead is evidence of women’s autonomy in/from the household’ and notes that notions of ‘inside and outside’ are open to complex interpretation. As Fauzia Ahmed (2014, 206) argues, rural Bangladeshi wives ‘do not want power as much as love, and they do not view good exit options as the desired outcome.’ Rao (2012) states in her research on migration and rural Bangladesh that female employment does lead to substantial control over incomes and decision-making but is often low paid and insufficient for independent life. When women pursue economic activity that is devalued, it is considered a loss of status for both the women and their husbands (Rao 2012, 37). The wealth arising from successful men’s migration seemed to provide prestige for the left-behind wives in my study. This finding supports Debnath and Selim’s (2009) notion that Bangladeshi men’s migration has created the phenomenon of ‘housewifization’. This term refers to households reaching a level of income that is enough to enable the woman to stay at home without undertaking any economic activities (Mies 1986). However, Debnath and Selim (2009, 141) also found that the Bangladeshi wives did not go outside to work even when the remittances from husbands were not enough, due to the ‘taboo’ on women’s mobility and participation in income generating activities.
Growing conservatism in gender norms (Rao 2012) caused by several underlying factors may be contributing to the ‘housewifization’ in Bangladesh. As stated earlier, previous research has linked Gulf migration to induced Islamization in Bangladesh (Gardner and Osella 2003; Siddiqi 2006; Kibria 2008; Hussain 2010), which includes adoption of more restrictive customs and ideologies concerning women’s rights. Sohela Nazneen (2018, 224) also writes, ‘the rise of extreme right ideology that vilifies Muslims both in the Western world and neighbouring India, coupled with the rise of political Islam inside Bangladesh including extreme right thinking in Saudi Arabia and Iran that interpret gender roles based on a crude reading of the Quran’, has reduced the traction for women’s empowerment movements. Recognizing this geopolitical context is vital to understand the impact of men’s labour migration on gender relations in Bangladesh.

The trend of ‘housewifization’ in Bangladesh is not without its benefits for women, but perhaps these benefits should also be assessed carefully in terms of the trade-offs they pose. Katy Gardner (1998) argues that while women in migrant households practice higher levels of seclusion than those in non-migrant households, it would be a mistake to assume that poorer, non-migrant women enjoy greater autonomy or empowerment within their households and community. Rather, they are oppressed by poverty ‘whilst women in the more Islamic orthodox households enjoy far greater public status and better material conditions’ (Gardner and Osella 2003, xviii). While it is certainly true that social respect and physical safety are more accessible for the ‘modern’ Muslim wife with a migrant husband, one might also wonder whether they perpetuate or even exacerbate discriminatory social practices towards women. The ‘modern’ Muslim housewife identity promotes traditions of keeping women at home, rather than directly confronting the problems that obstruct women’s physical mobility, including harassment by males and shame attached to sexual harassment. Women are conditioned to believe that a successful life for them entails avoiding public spaces where dangers lurk and relying on their husbands for financial security.

Thus, there are reasons to be concerned that men’s migration has only cemented the pre-existing social boundaries and taboos for the left-behind women in Bangladesh. My research does not indicate that migration has somehow addressed the root causes that vilify and hinder women’s mobility and autonomy. The label of a ‘respected wife’, championed by migrant men and enforced with the help of in-laws, reinforces the patriarchal and religious norms that limit the scope for female agency. Women’s secluded or limited physical mobility has become a symbol of upward economic status that the wives themselves desire. While suburban wives are
generally more mobile and independent than village wives, this has little to do with husbands’ migrant status, and more to do with the suburban setting.

10.2.2. Men’s Migration, Patriarchy and Newly Emerging ‘Religious Modernity’

Some research studies document the ways in which migration abroad may influence the trajectory of culture and religion in the sending community. Datta and Mishra (2011) explain that in rural India, migration is not just about moving up the economic ladder; it symbolises modernity and the possibility of upward (social) mobility. Migrants bring back not just goods and services, but also fresh ideas, attitudes, and interests to a stagnant rural society (Datta and Mishra 2011). In rural Morocco, the development of a modernist Islam along with gradually changing norms is believed to have led to restrictions on early marriage for girls while promoting female education (De Haas and Rooij 2010). These pictures, however, do not match the observations from villages I visited in Bangladesh. The meaning and practice of migration-induced ‘modernity’ is thus context specific. My findings lean more closely to what Francis Watkins (2003, 69) found among migrants in Pakistan that modernity is both a rejection of what are perceived to be ‘western values’, and an emphasis on the importance of the Brotherhood of Islam. In my study villages, ‘modern’ Islam entails women embracing Burkha and practices such as rejecting television. The practice of early marriages for girls in rural Bangladesh has been reinforced, not weakened. Similar to rejection of ‘Western values’ in Watkins’ (2003) research, migrant households in my study villages reject watching television. In Chapter Two, I discussed the general popularity of Indian made daily soaps (often depicting troubled relationships between mothers and daughters-in-law) in Bangladesh. Migrant households, however, largely rejected television as they perceived it as a feature of Hindu culture from India and a threat to their ‘Islamic’ culture.

I argue that ‘modern’ Islam is a powerful agent in reconstructing ‘housewifization’, in the context of men’s labour migration in Bangladesh. My research suggests that men’s labour migration reinforces local patriarchal norms and develops the ground for ‘modern’ Islam to thrive in Bangladesh. The blend of these two, by design, does not advance women’s status in the community. Unlike the urban villages in India, where women are challenging conventional codes of marriage (Govinda 2013), women in rural Bangladesh do not have such means to challenge existing patriarchal structures. Men’s migration certainly has not created such scope for women, as it does not challenge the rigid patriarchal norms. Girls are given in marriage at an early age to recreate the conventional power relation with their mothers-in-law, and hence,
a left-behind wife turns to mother-in-law of another left-behind wife in no time of her life cycle. This power structure continues to prevail, since, men’s migration does not contest the patrilocal culture in the villages.

The scenario is slightly more promising for suburban women in the migrant households. The research sample included suburban women who were able to pursue education and participate in part-time employment—activities that are still unimaginable for village women. The only way for village women to fulfill their daily needs and maintain a ‘respected’ life is by depending on their extended family or male kin. The fact that both suburban and village wives practice *Burkha*, but only the village wives are restricted in physical mobility hints that village norms, rather than religion, are the primary factor mediating women’s freedom.

**10.2.3. Towards a Problematic Masculinity**

Walter et al. (2004) suggest that in strongly patriarchal cultures, such as that associated with Mexican migrants in California, masculinity is produced through the practices and representations of male providers. In South Asia, this representation of idealised masculinity marks the transition from a dependent child to responsible adult (Osella and Osella 2000). In Chapter One, I detailed how migration serves as a crucial and almost inevitable part of a male’s transition from boy to man in South Asia including Bangladesh, India and Nepal (Sharma 2008; Osella and Osella 2000; Valentin 2012). Yet, the exploitation suffered while working as a labour migrant abroad can make these men feel vulnerable and challenge their knowledge about masculinity from home. As Rebecca Elmhirst (2007) explains, masculinities are reworked around the insecurity and public embarrassment felt by jobless and out of place migrants who feel that their identities as men are under assault. Moreover, their engagement in feminised labour such as cleaning and cooking abroad challenges their masculine identity. This is a reason why, upon return, men often glorify their pleasant and ‘macho’ experiences abroad and hide their ill-treatment or the feminised nature of their work. Furthermore, these men do not want to experience any additional cognitive dissonance, so they insist on maintaining the village norms in gender relations.

Connell (1987) stresses that hegemonic masculinity is always constructed in relation to at least three other types masculinity. i) complicit masculinity, which is derived from men’s general advantage over women; ii) subordinate masculinity, which is the opposite of hegemonic heterosexual ideal and is linked to homosexuality and femininity; and iii) marginalised masculinity, which represents race and class-based variations such as Black or working-class
masculinities (Connell 1987, 183). In the labour market, the least desirable jobs often go to the most marginal groups, usually sorted along gender, national and ethnic lines (Mckay 2007). Viewed within this framework, male labour migrants from Bangladesh belong to the marginalised masculinity group. However, as women themselves can reproduce gender hierarchies (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 848) and racially marginalised people can also reproduce racist hierarchies (Khalad 2017), I argue that men from marginalized groups can also create their own versions of hegemonic masculinity.

A large body of literature has explained that when men feel threatened by the loss of their masculine identities, they use numerous tactics to retain a powerful status. For example, men’s failure as providers in East Africa is associated with aggressive sexual behaviour, which is a tool for acquiring self-esteem and asserting domination over women, both of which are discursively constructed as legitimate ways of manifesting masculinity (Silberschmidt 2001). For Jat men in urban villages of India, alcohol, drugs, gambling, eve-teasing, wife-beating and honour killings are all perceived as avenues to recover hegemonic masculinity which is at risk when men lose ownership of their lands (Govinda 2013). Indeed, in Bangladesh too, there was an incident where a 30-year-old man with little education who returned from working in the UAE cut off his wife’s fingers when she enrolled herself at a college against his will (Ethirajan 2011). Although such violence may not be widespread in Bangladesh (three cases from my study are outlined in Chapter Seven), it does highlight a potential link between labour migration and abusive struggle for masculinity. In Chapter nine, I theorized that migrant men feel a loss of their hegemonic power over women in destination countries, and thus desperately cling to the powerful status they have over women in their households back in Bangladesh. Attempting to control their wives’ freedoms and mobility by enforcing the Burkha or preventing schooling is one manifestation of male migrants’ attempt to exert hegemonic masculinity.

While there is theoretically an element of ‘care’ in protecting one’s wife from the male gaze by limiting her physical movement, the element of ‘control’ appears to be more dominant among the migrant men, particularly in the villages. The wife’s economic dependence on the husband leaves little room for her to express any opinion that may clash with her husband’s. And by embracing women’s Purdah as expressed in the Saudi interpretation of Islam, village migrants subscribe to a wider set of beliefs about proper gender relations that emphasize female obedience, agreeability, and lack of autonomy. A successful labour migration minimizes the risks that these ideals would be compromised and the man’s hegemonic masculinity
challenged, as women are more likely to participate in income generating activities and interact with men outside when the household is experiencing financial pressure.

The migrant men in the villages not only marry young women, they also promote early marriages for their daughters and sisters, and thus keep the tradition of early marriage intact. Taylor et al. (2006) found in Guatemala that behind the new cinder-block buildings and smoked-glassed windows of migrant-built homes, gender roles and relations between men and women remain relatively unchanged. Similarly, in Bangladesh gender-roles and relations remain largely unchallenged. Furthermore, the patriarchal norms are reinforced in the name of ‘modern’ Islam.

Govinda (2013) found in her study on Jat men in India that with relatively easy and dependable access to money (from sources such as renting out the family house), young men feel no pressing need to pursue higher education or do skilled work. While the work of male labour migrants is usually very strenuous and performed under difficult circumstances, it may indeed encourage young men in Bangladesh to forego education. In a country like Bangladesh where many children have no opportunities to attend even low-quality primary schools and others leave schools semi-literate only to relapse into illiteracy (Shohel and Howes 2011), labour migration promises a viable avenue for disadvantaged people to secure a living. In Chapter nine, I discussed Singapore returnee Shibbir who claims that one drawback of labour migration is that it is ruining young men’s academic potential. Perhaps an accompanying result is that men from disadvantaged backgrounds are unable to leave behind traditional patriarchal norms in the long run. My findings suggest that improved economic status alone (achieved through labour migration) without quality education, is unlikely to bring transformative changes to the gender norms in Bangladesh.

10.3. Concluding Thoughts

From the perspective of left-behind women, husbands’ migration appears as a ‘mixed blessing’ as Debnath and Selim (2009, 144) have explained. Married couples’ sacrifice in reproductive relations is compensated by the hope of financial stability for the family and by the higher social status that increased wealth can provide. This echoes some literature on left-behind wives (De Snyder 1993; Aysa and Massey 2004) I discussed in Chapter Three that explains the consequences of husbands’ absence cannot always be explained in clearly defined terms. Similar to De Haas and Rooij’s (2010) findings on left-behind women from rural Morocco,
women in my research generally believe, despite the difficulties, that it is certainly better to be a migrant’s wife because of the money. Women in migrant households are dependent on their husbands’ remittances, but they recognize that the alternative—being married to a non-migrant husband—also entails dependence on their husbands’ income, which may not be sufficient to meet the household’s need (De Haas and Rooij 2010).

In the present sociocultural context of Bangladesh, men’s labour migration does not seem to introduce significant changes in gender relations. The scenario is similar to what Taylor et al. (2006) found in Guatemala: rapid and radical changes to male-female relationships and gender roles were not only absent in the aftermath of men’s migration waves, but also hardly desired by most Guatemalan women who were focused on survival. The women’s ‘struggle for equality and fair treatment takes second place to providing food and shelter for children and elders’ (Taylor et al 2006, 58). My research adds an additional caveat that even when women’s financial status improves, the norms of female ‘modesty’ may curb women’s physical mobility and decision-making power in the villages.

Esthel Crowley (2014, 3) notes in her research on third world women and the inadequacies of Western feminism that in reality, most poor women are too busy simply trying to survive within the existing system to even think about changing it. Prominent feminist economist Naila Kabeer (2011, 506) states that in Bangladesh where many citizens find themselves unable to engage as active citizens beyond periodic voting, ‘the additional constraints of patriarchy [mean] that women have found it even more difficult to articulate a collective voice around their needs, interests and rights.’ I have argued in this thesis that male labour migration has further reduced the scope for women to claim their rights, as it reinforces patriarchy and facilitates narratives of ‘modern’ Islam that heavily favour men. Gardner and Osella (2003) describe the impact of male migration from South Asia as ‘an ambiguous experience with winners and losers’ bringing benefits and prospects of mobility for men but increasing inequality and dependency for women. This applies particularly to the village women in my study, for whom the affairs of the home dominate their entire life; many never even get to visit another district or town. On the other hand, labour migration offers men a chance to travel and experience life beyond their homes even though they, too, perform menial and gruelling labour.

I do not find any exploitative relations between the left-behind family and migration brokers, a concern that I raised earlier in Chapter Two. While brokers still exist and many participants mention getting their paperwork (Visa and passport) done by the broker in exchange for money
or land, the broker is not usually seen as a negative character among village communities. There was no instance of a broker pressuring the left-behind family for money in the study locations. Finally, the female participants in this research are married women and girls whose husbands are labour migrants, and therefore, their experiences cannot be generalised as the universal narrative of all Bangladeshi women.

10.3.1. Directions for Further Research and Implications for Policy Makers

It is high time we look beyond remittances in analysing the effects of labour migration. My research has shown that improved economic standing of households does not necessarily equate to advancement of women’s overall status within their community or even within their households. Greater financial security earned through labour migration, can obstruct women’s education, freedom, and opportunities to participate in the economy by confining them inside the home. Moreover, improvement in economic status does not have clear-cut impact on women’s decision-making power, which is deeply rooted in gender norms, conception of masculine identities, and religious beliefs. As Lewis and Hossain (2018) note, economic gains in Bangladesh often displace issues of inclusivity, participation and rights. For prospective migrants and their families, labour migration is still a treacherous path where the risk of being exploited by illegal brokers or foreign employers looms large. They bear this risk because they lack viable alternatives. Namely, quality education which is an engine of economic mobility, political participation, and social change remains elusive for much of the population in Bangladesh. As Shohel and Howes (2011) state, the formal education system in Bangladesh has outdated curricula, fails to relate knowledge and action, and lacks the teaching of participatory democracy or policy formation. Labour migration is not a sufficient solution for these deficiencies of the education system, as satisfaction of economic needs is only one dimension of development that is needed in Bangladesh. In particular, my research draws attention to the potential stagnation or even regression of the movement for women’s empowerment that may result from relying on labour migration to alleviate poverty in Bangladesh. Initiatives to reform the current education system and make it accessible for all simply cannot be replaced.

Evidence from suburban Munshiganj shows that the practice of Burkha can facilitate women’s mobility in public spaces and provide some latitude for women to exercise their agency, which is not the case in rural Bogura. Further research could be conducted on how ‘modern’ religious sentiments and practices might be adapted to help village women increase their voices and
freedom. As discussed in Chapter Four, questioning Islamic practices and beliefs explicitly invites unpredictable tension in Bangladesh and such tensions are often extreme when the subject matter is women’s existing roles or clothing practice. Given the rise and established status of *Burkha* for the majority of the women in Bangladesh at the moment, it does not seem beneficial to confront this practice as an effort to improve the lives of marginalized women. Hence, greater attention may be allocated to how the most marginalised women (e.g. village wives in my research) may use this *Burkha* to enhance their autonomy and mobility in a similar way that suburban lower-middle class women do.

Finally, it is worth noting that the sense of abandonment and acute distress is largely absent among the wives (both from the villages and suburban areas) I interviewed for this study. The women do not feel that their husbands have placed them in particularly unfair or trying circumstances, but rather recognize the husbands’ sacrifice of leaving their homes to work hard for the sake of their family’s financial stability. The women do not perceive themselves as ‘left-behind’ wives. Hence, policies to provide these wives with social or economic protection should be made bearing in mind that the women do not necessarily see themselves as victims (‘left-behind’) and their husbands or in-laws as tyrants. This recognition can help the government and other organizations design interventions that engage the household as a whole in sensitive ways to help enact social change. While challenging the norm that respectable women should maintain limited mobility likely requires a transformative change at the cultural level, policies in the near term may target ways to get young women involved in participatory education and public engagement. Creating a constructive alternative to ‘housewife’ through female education and changes in the mindset of the masses is a critical step to challenge the notion that only marriage can provide economic and physical safety for a woman.
# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Village left-behind wives’ profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Age during marriage</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Currently living with</th>
<th>Social class/ house type</th>
<th>Husband’s migration status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Salima</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12th standard (college)</td>
<td>Children, brother and sisters-in-law</td>
<td>Lower Middle class. Brick house. Has TV, fancy furniture</td>
<td>In Iraq since four years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Shahnaz</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9th standard</td>
<td>Same house with Salima</td>
<td>Same House</td>
<td>In Saudi Arabia for the last nine years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Sumaiya</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7th standard in madrassa</td>
<td>Parents-in-law and her infant</td>
<td>Poor. Mud house.</td>
<td>In Saudi Arabia in the last five years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Rabeya</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7th standard</td>
<td>Old mother in-law. Rabeya currently head of the family.</td>
<td>Poor. Mud House.</td>
<td>In UAE for last six years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Standard in madrassa</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Occupation and Family</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Duration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Habiba</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10th standard</td>
<td>10th standard in madrassa</td>
<td>Poor. Mother, uncle and his family. (Joint family). Father is also a migrant.</td>
<td>In Malaysia since last four years.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Jahanara</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>7th standard</td>
<td>7th standard in madrassa</td>
<td>Old father-in-law</td>
<td>Poor mud house. In-law does not allow TV.</td>
<td>In Malaysia since last ten years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Sakhina</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>No education</td>
<td>No education</td>
<td>Children, brother-in-law and his family</td>
<td>Poor mud house. No modern furniture, and television.</td>
<td>In Saudi Arabia for last five months.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Adori</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>10th standard</td>
<td>10th standard</td>
<td>Children and in-laws</td>
<td>Lower middle class. Two storey building, modern furniture, television.</td>
<td>In Saudi Arabia for last six years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Jannati</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5th standard</td>
<td>5th standard in madrassa</td>
<td>Her child, parents and sisters-in-law.</td>
<td>Lower middle class. In-laws do not prefer TV.</td>
<td>In Saudi Arabia for last four years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Fatima</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8th standard</td>
<td>8th standard</td>
<td>Daughter-in-law, son and a grandchild.</td>
<td>Lower-middle class with new</td>
<td>In Saudi Arabia for last 12 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Standard</td>
<td>Status</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Location</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Amina</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10th</td>
<td>Parents in laws, brother and sister in-laws.</td>
<td>Lower-middle class with new house, furniture, and TV</td>
<td>In Saudi Arabia for last eight years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Tahida</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11th</td>
<td>Same house</td>
<td>Same house</td>
<td>In Saudi Arabia for last four years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Amina’s sister-in-law)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1st year of college)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Nurjahan</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>Children and parents-in-law</td>
<td>Poor, mud house. No fancy furniture and TV</td>
<td>In Malaysia for last ten years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Sadia</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10th</td>
<td>Parents and her infant</td>
<td>Poor, mud house. No fancy furniture and TV</td>
<td>In Saudi Arabia for last five years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Moslema</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>Parents-in-law and daughter</td>
<td>Poor mud house with no fancy furniture. Has TV.</td>
<td>In Iraq for last three years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Sathi</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9th</td>
<td>Parents-in-law and son</td>
<td>Poor mud house with no fancy furniture. Has TV</td>
<td>In Iraq for last two years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Marzan</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>Children and parents-in-law</td>
<td>Poor, mud house. No fancy furniture and TV</td>
<td>In Saudi Arabia for last four years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Class</td>
<td>Status/Relationship</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Rehana</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8th standard Son and parents-in-law</td>
<td>Poor, mud house. No fancy furniture and TV</td>
<td>In Saudi Arabia for six years.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Bilkis</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7th standard Sister and sister’s husband</td>
<td>Lowe middle class, new house.</td>
<td>In Saudi Arabia for last 13 years.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Hafija</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>High school graduate Brother-in-law and his wife</td>
<td>Lower-middle class with modern furniture, and TV</td>
<td>In Saudi Arabia for last 12 years.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Monira</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5th standard Parents</td>
<td>In-law’s are poor with mud house.</td>
<td>In Saudi Arabia for last one year.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Sheuli</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10th standard Extended in-law</td>
<td>Poor household, has TV</td>
<td>In Kuwait for last five months.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Purnima</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7th standard Extended in-law</td>
<td>Poorest mud house. No fancy furniture and TV.</td>
<td>In Kuwait for last seven months.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 2: Sub-urban left behind wives’ profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Age during marriage</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Currently living with</th>
<th>Social class/house type</th>
<th>Husband’s migration status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Laila</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Secondary school</td>
<td>Children</td>
<td>Lower middle class</td>
<td>In Qatar for last 16 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Zarina</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10th standard</td>
<td>Return migrant husband, children</td>
<td>Lower middle class</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia for 20 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Munni</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Studying BA</td>
<td>Next to her parents’ house, with child.</td>
<td>Lower middle class</td>
<td>In Malaysia for last four years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Sania</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8th standard</td>
<td>Close to parents’ house with mother-in-law and child.</td>
<td>Lower middle class</td>
<td>In Kuwait for last six months.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Aklima</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8th standard</td>
<td>Son and mother-in-law</td>
<td>Lower middle class</td>
<td>In Malaysia for last three years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Moina</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6th standard</td>
<td>Son</td>
<td>Lower middle class</td>
<td>In Qatar for 23 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Jhorna</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9th standard</td>
<td>Next to her parents’ house with daughters</td>
<td>Lower middle class</td>
<td>In Qatar for 16 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Kolpona</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5th standard</td>
<td>Son</td>
<td>Lower middle class</td>
<td>In Saudi Arabia for last eight years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Class</td>
<td>Year of Study</td>
<td>Status</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Rupali</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2nd year of college</td>
<td>Children</td>
<td>In Qatar for last seven years.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Nasima</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5th standard</td>
<td>Next to her parents’ house with children.</td>
<td>In Malaysia for last eleven years.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3: Village migrant men’s profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Social Class</th>
<th>Migration Status</th>
<th>Occupation in host country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Sikandar Ali</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Lower middle class</td>
<td>Returned (after seven years)</td>
<td>Catering in Saudi Arabia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Ziaur Rahman</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Lower middle class</td>
<td>Returned (after ten years)</td>
<td>Catering in Saudi Arabia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Atiqur Rahman</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>5th standard</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Returned after four years.</td>
<td>Construction worker in Qatar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Uzzal</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>4th standard</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Currently on leave. (10 years abroad)</td>
<td>Tea garden worker in Malaysia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Imdadul Haq</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>5th standard</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Currently on leave. (11 years abroad)</td>
<td>Shop worker in Saudi Arabia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Shibbir Ahmed</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>College graduate</td>
<td>Lower middle class</td>
<td>Currently on leave. (13 years abroad)</td>
<td>Delivery worker in Singapore.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Abu Raihan</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>3rd standard</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Returned (Eight years abroad)</td>
<td>Electrician and waiter in Malaysia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Abu Said</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>7th standard</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Returned (Three years abroad)</td>
<td>Warehouse worker in UAE.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Enamul</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>5th standard</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Returned (Four years abroad)</td>
<td>Construction worker in Oman.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Social Class</td>
<td>Migration status</td>
<td>Occupation in host country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Delwar Hossain</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>8th standard</td>
<td>Lower middle class</td>
<td>Returned (Ten years abroad)</td>
<td>Cleaner in Saudi Arabia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Mostak Ahmed</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Honours graduate</td>
<td>Lower middle class</td>
<td>Returned (Nice years abroad)</td>
<td>Shop workers in Saudi Arabia.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix 4: Sub-urban migrant men’s profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Social Class</th>
<th>Migration status</th>
<th>Occupation in host country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mozammel Hoque</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>College Graduate</td>
<td>Lower middle class</td>
<td>Returned (Abroad 12 years)</td>
<td>Factory worker in Singapore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Jabbar Ali</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>No education</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>On leave (Three years abroad)</td>
<td>Cleaner in Saudi Arabia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Jamil Hossain</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>College Graduate</td>
<td>Lower middle class</td>
<td>Returned (Abroad ten years)</td>
<td>Construction workers in Singapore.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Raisul Alam</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>8th standard</td>
<td>Lower middle class</td>
<td>On leave (Abroad four years)</td>
<td>Catering in UAE.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Rezaul Alam</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>10th standard</td>
<td>Lower middle class</td>
<td>Returned (Abroad ten years)</td>
<td>Different manual jobs in Saudi Arabia.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 5: Ethics Approval Letter

COLEG BUSNES, Y GYFRAITH, ADDYSG A GWYDDORAU CYMDEITHAS
COLLEGE OF BUSINESS, LAW, EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

11/07/17

Annwyl/ Dear Marzana Kamal

Yng/ Re: Wives left behind: The impacts of men’s international labour migration on their wives in Bangladesh.

Diolch am eich cais diweddar i Bwyllgor Ymchwil Moeseg CBLESS.

Mae’r pwyllgor wedi ystyried eich cais, ac fe wyf yn awr mewn sefyllfa i roi caniatâd, ar ran y Pwyllgor Ymchwil Moeseg CBLESS, i chi gychwyn eich prosiect ymchwil.

Dymunaf yn dda i chi gyda’ch ymchwil.

Thank you for your recent application to the CBLESS Research Ethics Committee. The Committee has considered your application and I am now able to give permission, on behalf of the CBLESS Research Ethics Committee, for the commencement of your research project.

I wish you well with your research.

Yn gywir iawn/ Yours sincerely

Dr. Marguerite Hoerger
Chair, CBLESS Research Ethics Committee
Cadair, Pwyllgor Ymchwil Moeseg CBLESS

Cc: Goruchwylwr/ Pennaeth Ysgol
Supervisor/Head of School
Glossary

Alem  Islamic scholar
Amar  My
Ami   I
Apa/Bon Sister
Ashol Real
Baba/Bap Father
Baje  Bad
Bari/Ghor House
Baire Outside
Beta  Son/male
Bia   Marriage
Bibek Morals
Bidhan Instructions
Bou   Wife
Chaha Paternal Uncle
Cholafera Physical movement
Choritrohin Characterless
Dunia World
Ekhane Here
Gaa   Body
Golam Servant
Gram Village
Hat   Hand
Jibon Life
Joor  Strength
Jonno For
Ki     What
Kotha  Words
Ma     Mother
Madrassa  Islamic/Arabic school
Mama   Maternal Uncle
Manush Human
Meye   Girl
Miskin Beggar
Mohila Woman
Mon    Heart
Moto   Similar
Niot   Vow
Probashi Migrant
Prothom First
Shai/O He/She
Shami  Husband
Shotru Enemy
Shoukhin Aesthetic
Shudhu Only
Shundor Nice
Sol    Child
Sramik Labour worker
Tumi   You
Valo   Good
Vodro  Respectable
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