

Bengali Migrant Women in Malaysian Industry: The Impact of a (Con-)Temporary Experience on Women's Lives

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Introduction

In line with the overall trend of globalization, labor flows within Asia have increased dramatically over the past decades and are expected to continue rising. Labor shortages in some countries versus unemployment in other regions together with an overall increase in communication and the lucrative labor-business combined, gave strong incentives for migration. Meanwhile, in Asia a feminization of migration can be witnessed over the last decades (Truong, 1996; Lim and Oishi, 1996). Indonesia and the Philippines are two cases in point where documented female migrants outnumber documented male migrants. But also in Bangladesh, economic needs seem to have counter balanced the cultural and religious factors that traditionally restricted the mobility of women (United Nations, 1995).

This article is based on the findings of a study in progress focusing on Bangladeshi women who temporarily migrated to Malaysia to work in labor-intensive industries. Fieldwork in two adjacent states in Malaysia has been completed. Phase I and II of the migration process. The fieldwork results from Bangladesh (phase III) are currently being processed. This article therefore, concentrates on the first two stages of the migration experience.

I will first briefly touch upon some theoretical guidelines from which I depart. Then I will give a brief sketch of the migrant women's profile. I will focus on the motivations for migration and the decision making process. Next, remunerations and the effect of the economic crisis on migrant workers in Malaysia will be discussed and social aspects of life in Malaysia will be highlighted. I will also touch upon women's perceptions on gains of the migration experience. In the conclusion the economic and social aspects, as well as the global and the local will be linked.

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Gender and women's agency

In this study I want to look at the impact the migration experience has on the lives of migrant women. Who are the women who are leaving? Who made the decision to migrate and why do they go? Since the 1970s, worldwide, significant economic and political transformations have been occurring. Transnational corporations are major actors in this global restructuring. Migration, amongst others to global factories, is one of the features of the ongoing global transformations. In this study we want to focus on the inter-linkage of the global, the largely perceived to be economic realm, with the local, that is the social, gendered and personal realm.

Women's (as well as men's) agency is put central stage in this study. Agency can be defined as the ability to define one's goals and act upon them. But agency is not synonymous with action in the usual sense, as agency can include passivity, accommodation, withdrawal and resistance (Wolf, 1994:24). Nevertheless, it is also recognized that actors are conditioned by outside forces and that their agency is structured within the context of their collectivities (Etzioni, 1988:181 in Wolf, 1994). Garment workers in Bangladesh as well as women who migrate have been highly stigmatized by the media and faced with opposition from religious factions and often from large sections of their communities. Many women undoubtedly suffer from this.

However, women did use the space created by new opportunities to take up paid work in order to earn for their families and themselves. As Steenbeek (1995) suggests, although cultural-ideological systems such as gender norms appear to be coherent and consistent, they are not completely fixed, unambiguous and clearly demarcated. Women do stretch boundaries of 'femininity-constructs'. But it does go hand in hand with opposition and outcomes are often not clear-cut and can be accompanied by high social costs, as we will see. The consequences following the *choice* to migrate may be different, even contradicting, at different levels. Hence, it is crucial to create a frame where contradictions and subtleties can be discerned.

I find the highly popularized concept of 'empowerment' problematic. The pitfall of top-down interpretations is very real. Kabeer's (1999) interpretation, however, of women's ability to make choices, that is, specifically, choices as women define them, may be helpful in our context to understand the many aspects of gendered migration. Several studies in villages in Northern Bangladesh (Amin, 1997; Arcens, forthcoming) found that hardly any woman has taken up paid labor outside the homestead while studies in Dhaka and villages close to

Dhaka (Feldman, 1992; Zaman, 1995; Kabeer, 2000) show that, relatively speaking, many women took up paid work outside the home since the 1970s.

In this study we found that women who migrate exclusively come from Dhaka and the surrounding districts. The different conclusions of these studies may, at least partially, be explained geographically. The structural factors (droughts, famine, political and economic crisis) that led to the increase of women's need and desire to work outside were nation wide to be discerned, but it was in Dhaka and close to Dhaka, the economic and political center, where structural factors led to job opportunities. Thus, gender fluidity and agency are definitely influenced by broader political and economic forces, which reverberate in communities and households in particular places (Lawson, 1998). The 'local' interweaves with the 'global'.

It is beyond the scope of this article to examine whether poor and working women are really challenging traditional values and patriarchal authority and are becoming a powerful force of change in society as some suggest (Zaman, 1995:107; Feldman, 1992). However, since most women encountered much opposition to their migration, I want to depart from a position formulated by Khan who states that since female participation in outside work is still perceived to be in contrast with traditionally prevailing norms, a proper perspective to women's situation and problems should therefore take women in *the dynamics* of this contradiction' (Khan, 1992:14).

Profile of the migrant women

Since the 1980s Bangladeshi women are going to the Middle East, India and Pakistan as domestic workers. Many more women, often unaware, are drawn into illegal circuits especially trafficking. Exact numbers are not available but it is believed to exceed 100 000. Since the beginning of the nineties, women were recruited to the industrial sector in overseas countries. Official statistics report that between 1991 and 1996 11000 documented Bangladeshi women were working abroad. Of them 5000 were employed in Malaysia's labor-intensive industries. In 1998, due to reported mistreatment and abuse of domestic workers, the Bangladeshi government put a halt to the ('legal') migration of women for any low-skilled job. This led to an increase in the undocumented, thus unprotected, migration of many women.

Since little is known about Bangladeshi women who went to Malaysia, a short survey was carried out among 139 migrant women whom we

met in their hostels. In fall 1999 and in fall 2000 we went back many times for more informal discussions and interviews. The majority of the migrant women worked in four different multinational corporations producing for the export market, i.e. in electronics and garments in two adjacent states in Malaysia. The study encompassed almost all factories that were hiring Bengali migrant women in these states.

Table 1: Marital status of respondents

	Frequency	Percentage
Unmarried	64	46.0
Married	36	25.9
Divorced/separated	30	21.6
Widowed	9	6.5
Total	139	100

Source: Fieldwork Survey, 2000

As table 1 shows, of all women, 46%, were unmarried before they came to Malaysia. 26% were married when they came and 22% were divorced or separated whereas 7% were widowed. It is true that women sometimes do conceal their real marital status. Even stating to their fellow workers that they are unmarried while they are not. Reasons can be related to shame. Still, we found that almost half of the women are unmarried. This contrasts the findings in Siddiqui's study (2000) on returned migrant women. Here, almost 50% of the women came from stable marriages and only a small proportion of the women were unmarried. This partly reflects the fact that any survey on migrant women hardly can be done by random sampling since statistics (and addresses) are not available, and thus cannot claim to be representative. It also may be partly due to the fact that unmarried women, as we noticed, try to stay as long as possible in *bidesh*, whereas married women will return after a couple of years. Additionally, it was our experience that the youngest and generally unmarried women were the shyest and most reluctant in participating in the study, which is closely related to the issue of social stigmatization.

The age of the respondents is generally very young. Many told us that they did not give their actual age while applying for a passport, as 18 was the required minimum age set by the companies. 33 of the 139 women were below 18, some (3) were even as young as 14 when they first arrived. The average age was 21.

The percentage of women who are illiterate is 32% (44 women). For the unmarried women, the youngest group, it is 23%. Illiteracy amongst migrant women is lower than the average for the country. One reason is that, though they obviously also have not applied this rule too strictly several companies, mainly electronics, required women to read and write a bit. 35 women (25.2%) studied up to class 6, 29 women (20.9%) studied up to class 9 and 27 women (19.4 %) finished class 10 of which the majority passed SSC. Only two passed HSC. Now one might think that women stopped their education to go abroad. Nothing is less true. The majority of the unmarried women would have wanted to continue their education but because of the economic situation at home they had been forced to stop their schooling.

Most women did not have a paid job (65%, 91 women) before leaving, though 20% (27 women) had been working in the garment industry prior to coming to Malaysia. For the unmarried women 75% had not been holding paid jobs and 19% had been working in garments. For ex-garment workers, working in garments in Bangladesh could be regarded as a stepping-stone to migration. Stories about better wages in factories in *bidesh* circulated. To other migrant women, migration was an alternative to entering garments in Bangladesh. On one hand payments in garments were regarded too low and conditions too harsh. On the other hand, some felt that working there was unacceptable regarding the status of their family. Going abroad, though admittedly still problematic, as we will see later, was regarded to be a more suitable option.

A relative large proportion of respondents' households own land. The majority reckons it is not much, barely enough for own consumption. Evaluating the economic background of the women's households back home whilst being in Malaysia is naturally not easy.

However, we can conclude that the majority of women's families were facing economic hardship. Indeed for many of the poorest the average fee of 63,000 taka including costs on passports etc, was hard to obtain. The money for these fees was generally collected from various sources combined. Ranging from selling or leasing land or trees, animals, gold and sewing machines to borrowing from different relatives to moneylenders at large interest rates.

Motivations for migration; beyond the economic explanation

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss migration theory extensively. It suffices to say that most theory looks at male migration and sees women as followers. Additionally, economic motivations are generally highlighted. In more recent years the academic interest in

female migration is increasing. Behavioral approaches, for instance have been more sensitive to ideological, cultural and class constraints that influence geographical mobility. The household strategies approach in addition, also focuses on the power relations within the household. The need to also look at the family setting and the roles of its members is emphasized in relation to the migration decision (Chant, 1992; Lim, 1995). Here, we draw from both approaches. As we have seen earlier, female migrants actually do not come from one specific stage of the life cycle; different stages of life cycles are fairly well represented. Hence, someone's stage in the life cycle cannot be regarded as a determining factor.

Table 2 summarizes the motivation of migration. In the survey, 65.5% of all women recalled that they came to improve the economic situation. Others gave reasons such as needing to be independent, wanting to improve their own future prospects or getting away from difficult situations at home. In short, the category 'social limitations' refers to motivations that hinted to lack of possibilities to improve one's situation within Bangladesh due to prevalent gender roles and expectations and the gender division of labor.

Table 2: Women's motivations for migrating to Malaysia

	unmarried	Married	divorced	widowed	total
Economic reasons	50 78.2%	22 61.1%	12 40%	7 77.7%	91 65.5%
Social limitations	14 21.8%	14 38.9%	18 60%	2 32.3%	48 34.5%
Total	64 100%	36 100%	30 100%	9 100%	139 100%

Source: Fieldwork Survey, 2000

Since the topic of female migration is an issue that encompasses stigmatization and taboo, qualitative data is necessary to grasp the dynamics at stake. It can be asserted that saying that economic improvement induced the decision to migrate is the cultural correct answer and may mask underlying issues. The analyses of informal talks and interviews with about 50 women revealed that the economic motivations very often were interwoven with reasons related to their gender roles. I would want to argue that marriage and dowry, in one way or another, played a pivotal role in the reasoning of migration for most women.

In most cases, whatever marital status, relatives and neighbors talked a lot and were very much against women's migration: '*bidesh* is not for

women. Women who go there are bad', it was said. For that reason some did not tell many people they were leaving. 'Father was very concerned about what villagers were saying, I gave him courage'. I said: 'if we have no food then would any of them give us food? Let them talk'. The determination and self-confidence of many of these women is clearly illustrated by a young woman's remark: 'everybody was saying that I should not go, but I replied very boldly I must go. They said that a man can do work, I replied being a woman I also can learn and do work. I have to think of my family'

It is remarkable that more than half of the women seem to have wanted to migrate themselves. A common strategy among women was to convince a key person, a grandfather, brother or uncle who then would convince the other family members. Sometimes it took a while and brothers or uncles often remained against it and had a hostile attitude towards the migrant woman. They feared that the family honor would be tarnished. The financial needs and the economic aspirations made family members agree. It should be noted however, that a number of women, however few, were persuaded by their family. Here, having debts played a big role and the fact that the migration fee was substantially lower for women.

Although many of the young Bengali women seemed, at least partly, to be leaving out of a feeling of responsibility and definitely wanted to add to the family income, their strong agency and determination which led to their migration should be acknowledged as being a powerful act of choice. I agree with Kabeer (2000:189) who, while looking at the relation of women's entrance into garments work, observes that managing to take up factory work while having faced opposition from family members is a 'first, and very critical, point in the process by which access to waged employment is translated into an impact on women's lives'.

It can be concluded that to fully understand the migration of Bengali women, one should look beyond economic reasons only. The need for economic means is often linked to limited possibilities due to gender roles and beliefs; problems and dependencies that were created by these very gender roles. Many of the married, divorced and widowed women had no husband who could or took properly care of them. Migration was seen as a way out of a negative spiral enabling them to take responsibility for one's family and future.

It is sadly ironic, that the largest group of women, the unmarried ones, are being stigmatized for being 'shameless' while desperately trying to obtain the huge dowries their families are expected to pay in order to

get them married. As Rosario (1992:151) states reflecting on the high dowry demands that have become custom: '(...) men want it both ways (i.e. Women who are young/pure/fair/useless as well as educated/rich/income -producing). Bengalis want the fruits of modernity (radio's, televisions, motorcycles etc) but are not willing to pay the price (increasing incorporation of women in the workforce threatening their purity)'.

It is precisely this dilemma that leads unmarried women stigmatized, in their efforts to earn for their and their sisters dowries, as we will see in a later section. Meanwhile it is also this very dilemma that *legitimizes* their move in the eyes of the family. The institution of marriage and its attached meanings, roles, and its institutionalization played a pivotal role in women's motivation to migrate. Money and marriage are inseparable. Migration, money and marriage as well. In spite of all 'bad' stories and rumors circulating about the loss of *izzat* abroad, these women are betting that when they return having succeeded economically, this will reflect in their family's status and in turn might uplift their social status. Since economic reasons are a major force to migrate, we will now take a closer look at what the actual economic gains are.

Remuneration - Migration; a good bet?

With, relatively speaking, the largest immigrant population within Asia, Malaysia is a particular case in point. Official estimates exceed 1.2 million foreign workers in 1997, since then it decreased to 700 000 (Migration News, 2000). Unofficial sources report up to 2 million immigrants. The largest group are Indonesian workers, second are Bangladeshi's. All in all there were 129 000 documented Bengali workers in Malaysia in 2000. In 1997 it were about 200 000. As mentioned, before the sparse statistics reveal that 5000 Bengali women had left for Malaysian factories between 1991 and 1998. They all work in the industrial sector. Globally, more and more immigrant countries opt for temporary versus permanent migration as a source of cheap labor (ILO, 1997). This is the case in Malaysia. While the past two decades have shown very inconsistent policies on migrant labor and much rhetoric on the need to stop the influx of migrant labor, for it's economic growth, the country clearly depends on migrant labor to a large extent (Rudnick, 1996).

Agents and managers, who went to Bangladesh to recruit workers, had promised good wages and facilities. We found that in most factories basic wages were as promised and similar to those of locals. It was

however not uncommon that certain facilities and allowances were not paid for and public holidays not given, sometimes that was according to the contract but not in line with what local workers received. Contracts signed in Bangladesh were not always honoured or lived up to. In one electronic factory, workers were simply made to return the contract they had obtained in Bangladesh. In another they were told it was not 'legal'. In several factories where payments were made according to law, overtime had been promised by managers when they came to Bangladesh to recruit the workers. But in several factories overtime was hardly given. This was a major set back since it is the overtime, which makes a huge difference on payrolls. Calculations prior to leaving on the feasibility of migration always have been made *including* overtime payments.

Malaysia has a large export producing industry. During the 1990's labor shortages in Malaysia occurred. It became hard to find women in the villages to go to the Export Processing Zones (EPZs). Managers often do prefer migrant workers to locals as they work harder and are always in for working overtime and can't just leave for another job elsewhere due to their fixed work permits (Rudnick, 1996). Not surprisingly, workers who do complain about unfair wages or too little overtime are being threatened with being sent away, or feel the threat so clearly that they do not even dare to complain. Hence, obedience is easily achieved. Thus, companies keep a firm grip on migrants' agency related to work. They also keep a close eye on their social activities outside the factory. Some women who were thought not to be obedient enough or achieving targets had been sent away.

In this light it is not all that surprising that the percentage of women who left the company for which they had been recruited before the end of the contract is quite large. Some went or were sent home. However, a relatively large number run away (an estimate of around 25% in the factories we studied). Despite the danger of being caught and ending up in detention camps they bought new passports and permits including bribes up to 4000 rm. Some are lured into believing that they will earn more elsewhere, others run because they fear being sent back home by the factory. It goes without saying that women were more vulnerable than men, sexual abuse did occur.

Good girls - bad girls constrains

Over the years, quite a number of negative stories on the behaviour of Bengali women in Malaysia have been published in Bengali tabloid magazines. The stories go on about the 'un-social' activities Bengali women in Malaysia are supposedly engaged in. Regularly, pictures and

names of specific girls and the factories they work in accompany the articles. Bengali men who worked in Malaysia write them and often clearly made them up out of revenge for non-answered 'love' and efforts to win a woman's heart. There seem to be parallels to the incidents of acid throwing on women in Bangladesh. The magazines are being sold back home (and will surely be read in the villages as well) and are also available in Bengali shops in Malaysia catering to the Bengali community. All women know these stories and most are terrified of the effects on their lives, as they feel they are all stigmatised by it. Contrary to what they had expected before leaving, they now felt that their *izzat* was at stake. The tension between the images of the good girl - bad girl constrains women's space for manoeuvring. All were very aware of it and many were fearful.

Especially in the beginning women needed help for certain errands like banking. Bengali men in the neighborhood took care of their 'sisters'. In Bangladesh women and men do not freely meet, they have guardians. In Malaysia the company employed a guardian who looked after them. Meanwhile, some Bengali men took up the role of a guardian. They called each other fictive uncle or cousin sister. This was often interpreted wrongly. True enough some men and women did develop friendships and with the consent of the families back home got married, for some a way out of the fear of stigmatization and finally finding a suitable husband. Yet generally not a way out of fear: 'I do not know, he might always leave me, what can I do'. As a researcher and participant observer, I would say that the women tried to guard their *izzat* profoundly.

However, it was startling that many women said other women were bad, identifying with the paternalistic imagery to prove their own 'goodness'. As mentioned earlier, some had heard of stories before they left but did not believe them as they thought they were made up to keep them from going. Besides, many thought that if they would behave well, nothing could happen to them. 'As no five fingers are the same'. However, good or bad, most girls feared their future marriages might be jeopardized by the bad girl image. As a separated 'good' woman, stated: 'If I live here one or two days or three years does not matter, being here I got the stigma. When we go home no good family will send a groom to marry us, only the greedy ones who are interested in our money will marry us.'

There was bitterness about the way the Bengali men stigmatized Bengali women while most Bengali men have Malay or Indonesian girlfriends on whom they spent quite a bit of money. This however, is

not being discussed at length in tabloid magazines. One woman complained about the fact that men 'lure' women into certain behavior with all their presents or threat of spreading bad news about them if they don't comply. Most men I talked to were very negative about Bangladeshi women in Malaysia, even if they had never talked to one themselves. They had to be bad for the mere fact of leaving their homesteads.

Men's talking badly about women is an effective tool to hamper women from gaining more control over their own lives. Fear is being spread. Though many women stayed optimistic: 'My family will see when I come back that, I am good, they will believe me and can differentiate between what actually happens and all the rubbish that is being told'. While a closer look at this issue is needed, for now it can be concluded that the social stigmatization by male migrant workers does affect their space to maneuver and induces an atmosphere of fear and terror.

Women's perceptions on gains from their stay in Malaysia

It became clear that although most suffer from missing their families and remunerations were lower than envisioned, many women were also quite content with some aspects of their lives in Malaysia. On the question whether there are, other, non-material gains from their stay, it was often raised that: 'I can do any job in the factory. I think that in our country we could do any factory job.' Another young woman put it this way: 'when I was in the village, I have no thinking, I can't say anything, now I can talk. I am clever all around. I can talk in front of people just like you. After coming to *bidesh* I have courage.' Many women's self-confidence had clearly risen. Or as one woman put it more bluntly: 'I was a fool now I am clever'.

Most striking were the answers women gave on the rather general question of what they liked most about Malaysia. Many women said that the fact that women in Malaysia have jobs and earn an income impressed them. A very articulated and smart married woman said: 'Staying abroad is good for me because male and female can enjoy equal rights and everybody is engaged in their own job, no one is sitting idle. As a woman I like to do so many things but I do not get any support from any one. I think that we should have the right to work as well just as in the developed countries. It is quite unreasonable to think we are weaker than men.' Or as another woman say: 'If you work you have money and you do not need to ask others. You are not as vulnerable'.

Bengali women in Malaysia naturally felt good about being able to earn, it clearly had raised their sense of self esteem. Most hoped to be able to have a business or do something when they would return home. However, it was often talked about as a dream. On one hand, because they might not have earned enough money to set up something and on the other hand, their families might not allow them. Many felt they have gained confidence and learned much, work related, as well as in terms of interaction with others. Whether and what the long term effects of these experiences in Malaysia will be on their lives once they return home remains to be seen. Literature on women and factory work rightly has often highlighted the exploitive character of factory work and the lack of scope for real gender mobility, or in contemporary jargon for 'empowerment'.

As much as it may seem to be a paradox, migrant women who generally are fully aware of the exploitative character of their employment and the unequal wages they receive, simultaneously, largely perceive the working experience as such as a positive experience from which they gain on a personal level. Here I agree with Ruth Pearson, one of the first feminist researchers in the 1980s criticizing the then new trend of women's incorporation in global factories from a feminist/marxist perspective. In her more recent work (1998:184) she also highlights that: 'factory work because of its collective nature inevitably provides a location for a different kind of gendered experience, offering the possibility of alternative versions of gender roles and expectations'. Migration for work as it implies moving to a different society with different gender roles and expectations and living in different household-settings, definitely, does so too.

Conclusion

We saw that although some were sent by their family, many of the women who migrated had exposed strong agency to go. Economic motivations and a hard felt responsibility for their household were intertwined with issues related to gender roles in general and the institution of marriage more specifically. For unmarried women the need to earn money for their and their sister's dowries was often pivotal. Though female migrants are aware of the stigmatization related to migration they take the risk hoping that if they return economically successful the negative connotations of their migration will cease or at least be outweighed by the material aspects.

We witnessed that the remunerations were far lower than expected, on one hand because of the selling of empty dreams by unscrupulous labor agents and the promises by managers of factories, which were not always kept. And on the other hand because of the Asian economic

crisis which decreased migrant workers' remunerations substantially. Meanwhile, we also saw that social stigmatization from within the own community was stronger than women had expected, making their lives harder and their hopes for prosperous future's gloomier.

It is ironic that many women left to break impasses of economic hardship, which were to a large extent due to their gender and the norms and meanings attached to it, but by doing so were encountered with the same mechanisms.

Thus, migrant women clearly face challenges on two different, yet interrelated, levels:

- a) The 'local' world: controversies raised by their migration regarding gender behavior and meaning;
- b) The 'global' world: the conditions and payments of work in a global factory and life in a different society more generally.

Lower remunerations (the 'global' realm) clearly will have a negative impact on women's status after their return home. In literature, economic aspects receive the main attention in discussions on global restructuring. However, as we can see, global restructuring does encompass and affect all aspects of people's lives, i.e. the social, cultural and political. Simultaneously, we see that global restructuring entails re-workings of the boundaries between and the meanings of femininity and masculinity, which are intimately related to the shifting boundaries and meanings of private and public, domestic and international, local and global' (Marchand and Runyan, 2000:18).

Since, this study is ongoing, I will have to restrain from more profound conclusions for now. In Malaysia, migrant women clearly felt that on different levels their experiences had different impacts. As we saw, there is no straight 'positive' or 'negative' experience. The outcome is contradictory at times. While being in Malaysia, strategies on income and marriage for after their return are being thought and dreamed about much. Though, the future feels a little uncertain most women have faith.

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