Working gendered boundaries: temporary migration experiences of Bangladeshi women in the Malaysian export industry from a multi-sited perspective

Rudnick, A.M.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
In transforming deprived areas into great places to live much attention has been given to the physical, social and economical aspects of deprivation. However, little is known about the relationship between deprivation and emotional ties: What makes residents in deprived areas feel at home in their neighbourhood?

In this PhD thesis Peter van der Graaf focused on the emotional ties of residents to their neighbourhood and researched how these ties are affected by urban renewal. He also compares practices between the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, where the emotions of residents are considered more in urban renewal.
Working Gendered Boundaries
Working Gendered Boundaries

Temporary Migration Experiences of Bangladeshi Women in the Malaysian Export Industry from a Multi-Sited Perspective

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor
aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam,
op gezag van Rector Magnificus,
prof. dr D.C. van den Boom
ten overstaan van een door het College voor Promoties ingestelde commissie, in het openbaar te verdedigen in de Agnietenkapel
op woensdag 25 februari 2009, te 10.00 uur

door

Anja Margarete Rudnick

geboren te Aken, Duitsland
Promotiecommissie: Prof. dr. H.W. van Schendel  
                      Prof. dr. T. Siddiqui  
                      Prof. dr. V. Mazzucato  
                      Dr. R. Saptari  
                      Dr. J.M.J. Doomernik

Promotoren:        Prof. dr. I.S.A. Baud  
                      Prof. dr. G.A. de Bruijne (Emeritus)

Co-promotor:       Dr. L.S. Nencel

Faculteit der Maatschappij- en Gedragswetenschappen
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................. 9

## Chapter 1: Introduction .................................................................................................. 13

1.1 Temporary labour migration ...................................................................................... 14
1.2 South to South migration ......................................................................................... 15
1.3 The feminization of migration .................................................................................... 15
1.4 Focus of the study ..................................................................................................... 17
1.5 Outline of the book ................................................................................................... 18

## Chapter 2: Engendering Migration Theory ................................................................ 19

2.1 Why does gender matter? ......................................................................................... 20
2.2 Crossing boundaries: towards an engendered theoretical framework ....................... 22
2.3 The pre-migration stage ............................................................................................ 25
2.4 The migration stage .................................................................................................. 36
2.5 The post-migration stage .......................................................................................... 42
2.6 Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 44

## Chapter 3: The Sending and the Receiving Country: Bangladesh and Malaysia. .... 45

3.1 Bangladesh: Economic and demographic context ..................................................... 45
3.2 Migration: scope and direction of flows .................................................................... 48
3.3 Women, marriage and work in Bangladesh ............................................................... 51
3.4 Female migration ...................................................................................................... 55
3.5 The recruitment process: government policies, recruiters and procedures ............... 57
3.6 Destinations: the Middle East and Malaysia ........................................................... 59
3.7 Malaysia: Economic and Demographic context ....................................................... 60
3.8 The role of the manufacturing sector until the 1997 crisis ....................................... 62
3.9 Foreign workers ........................................................................................................ 64
3.10 The Asian economic crisis and its impact on migrant workers .............................. 66
3.11 Migration policies .................................................................................................... 68
3.12 Legal protection of migrant workers ...................................................................... 72
3.13 Public discourse ...................................................................................................... 73
3.14 Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 74

## Chapter 4: The Field Setting: Methodological Issues Regarding Gender-sensitive Research .......................................................................................................................... 77

4.1 The research sites ...................................................................................................... 78
4.2 Research methods ...................................................................................................... 82
4.3 Respondents’ and researchers’ social position in the study ...................................... 86
4.4 Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 97

## Chapter 5: Why Migrate? ............................................................................................ 99

5.1 Bangladeshi female migrants: socio-economic characteristics .................................. 99
5.2 Why did the women migrate? .................................................................................. 102
5.3 Economic motivations .............................................................................................. 105
5.4 Personal motivations for migration .......................................................................... 107
5.5 Socioculturally embeddedness of economic incentives .......................................... 109
5.6 Men's migration motivations ................................................................................... 123
5.7 Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 127
Chapter 6: From Desire to Decision and Departure ......................... 129
6.1 Decision-making processes of female migrants and gendered constraints . . 129
6.2 Decisions, strategies and resources ........................................... 131
6.3 Tapping into the migrant institution .......................................... 140
6.4 Conclusion ........................................................................... 147

Chapter 7: Working in Malaysia's Export Industry: Conditions and Wages . . 151
7.1 Companies ............................................................................. 151
7.2 Factors affecting employment conditions ...................................... 152
7.3 Collective action ..................................................................... 166
7.4 Divisions in the labour force ...................................................... 168
7.5 Coping mechanisms ................................................................. 172
7.6 Contract renewal ..................................................................... 175
7.7 Absconding ............................................................................ 176
7.8 Differences between migrant women and men ................................ 180
7.9 Job satisfaction ....................................................................... 182
7.10 Conclusion ............................................................................. 183

Chapter 8: Living in Malaysia: Negotiating Two Cultures ..................... 187
8.1 Malaysia and Bangladesh: differences in gender roles ......................... 188
8.2 The new social environment ....................................................... 190
8.3 Defamation .............................................................................. 195
8.4 Women about women ................................................................. 199
8.5 Courtship ................................................................................ 202
8.6 Potential grooms and marriages .................................................. 206
8.7 Staying on ............................................................................... 211
8.8 Conclusion .............................................................................. 213

Chapter 9: Back in Bangladesh: a New Beginning? .............................. 217
9.1 Remittances ............................................................................. 218
9.2 Allocation of remittances ............................................................. 221
9.3 Money and gender ................................................................. 226
9.4 Economic aspirations: financial investments made ......................... 230
9.5 Fulfilling women's social migration aspirations ................................ 244
9.6 Women's position in and versus the community ............................ 255
9.7 Returned migrant women and work ............................................. 257
9.8 Personal gains ........................................................................ 259
9.9 Conclusion ............................................................................. 261

Chapter 10: Conclusions ................................................................ 265
10.1 The pre-migration stage ............................................................ 265
10.2 The migration stage ................................................................. 270
10.3 Post-migration stage: back in Bangladesh ...................................... 280
10.4 Towards a new analytical model ................................................ 287

References .................................................................................... 291
Summary ......................................................................................... 309
Samenvatting ................................................................................ 313
List of Figures
Figure 2.1: Dual domain embeddedness during migration ..................37
Figure 10.1: Understanding the migration process ..........................288

List of Maps
Map 3.1: South-South East Asia ....................................... 45
Map 3.2: Bangladesh ............................................. 46
Map 3.3: Malaysia .................................................. 61

List of Tables:
Table 3.1: Structure of the Bangladeshi economy (% of GDP) ..............47
Table 3.2: Migration by country of employment (1976-2002) ..............50
Table 3.3: Structure of the Malaysian economy (% of GDP) ..............62
Table 3.4: Documented foreign workers in Peninsular Malaysia ...........65
Table 3.5: GDP growth and growth per sector ................................67
Table 4.1: Fieldwork structuring ....................................... 79
Table 5.1: Age upon arrival in Malaysia .................................. 99
Table 5.2: Marital status and average age upon arrival in Malaysia ........100
Table 5.3: Number of children among the Bangladeshi migrant women ...100
Table 5.4 Years of schooling among the Bangladeshi migrant women ....101
Table 5.5: Jobs prior to migration ....................................... 102
Table 5.6: Decision making regarding migration: impact of marital status ....103
Table 5.7: Primary motivation for migration ............................. 104
Table 5.8: Level of education of men and women ......................... 124
Table 5.9: Men’s primary reason for migration .......................... 125
Table 5.10: Decision making concerning migration ....................... 125
Table 6.1: Decision-making process .................................... 132
Table 6.2: Primary means by which the fee was financed ..................142
Table 6.3: Primary sources of financing fee (extended) .....................143
Table 6.4 Women’s fee by time of departure for Malaysia ..................144
Table 7.1: Companies employing Bangladeshi women ................... 152
Table 7.2: Average net monthly earnings after deductions .................153
Table 7.3: Value of the Malaysian ringgit in Bangladeshi takas .............162
Table 9.1: Remittances per factory and average number of months spent in Malaysia .............................................................. 220
Table 9.2: Allocation of remittances ..................................... 222
Table 9.3: Decision making concerning the allocation of remittances ......222
Table 9.4: Monthly earnings, living costs and remittances (in ringgits) ....224

List of Boxes:
Box 4.1: Fieldwork experiences ....................................... 92
Box 9.1: Nazma’s home coming – I ................................... 218
Box 9.2: Nazma’s homecoming – II ..................................... 225
Box 9.3: Nazma’s homecoming – IV .................................... 239
Box 9.4: Nahar’s story – I ............................................. 243
Table of Contents

Box 9.5: Nahar’s story – II .............................................248
Box 9.6: Nazma’s homecoming – V ..................................259
This PhD project took shape over an extended period of time. I was once told that a PhD is about perseverance, which I came to understand to be true. However, my study would not have taken off let alone been completed without the invaluable support, assistance and feedback provided by many people.

I am particularly grateful to the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO) for funding this study, and to the Amsterdam Institute for Metropolitan and International Development Studies (AMIDSt) for hosting and lending me support. My thanks go to Ton Dietz, who nudged me to consider doing a PhD and then stimulated me with his enthusiasm. I should also like to thank Geertje Lycklama à Nijeholt, who wholeheartedly supported me both while I was writing the research proposal and during the first part of the project. Geertje drew my attention to particularly relevant literature and shared her intimate knowledge of the field.

I am greatly indebted to my supervisors Isa Baud, Ad de Bruijne and Lorraine Nencel. Isa never ceased to give me her timely and relevant comments on the various versions of the chapters; she helped me sharpen my arguments and kept me going forwards. This was especially encouraging at those times when I was feeling a little lost in the project. I am very grateful to her. Ad’s enthusiasm, conviction and valuable comments were highly appreciated, as were Lorraine’s. The input Lorraine provided was particularly valuable when I was trying to come to grips with the qualitative data, as she helped me to appreciate the richness and value of the data I had gathered. I thank all three for their support and the knowledge they shared with me. Moreover, the grace and determination with which they supported me when things were exceedingly rough in my personal life meant much to me. In this respect, I also wish to thank Joke Schrijvers: the professional and personal support she provided during this period was very much appreciated.

The fieldwork I performed and the time I spent in Malaysia and Bangladesh were both scientifically successful and personally enriching, thanks to several people. First, I am grateful and indebted to three women who at various stages of the fieldwork joined and assisted me. Hasina Ahmed accompanied me to Malaysia during my first round of fieldwork. Her deep insights, hard work and considerable tact were of great value during the data gathering period. Many of the migrant women and men I met felt comforted by meeting Hasina. In Dhaka, Hasina also assisted me in her free time. She and her sisters generously opened their house to me, and their friendship (and great meals!) made me feel at home. Jenneke Arens joined me during the second fieldwork period in Malaysia. Her experience and no-nonsense attitude impressed not only me but also the migrant women we met. I highly appreciated the laughter and insights we shared. Syeda Farhana provided me with a place to live in Dhaka, and soon became a friend and a much appreciated research companion. She accompanied me to most of the interviews and visits to returned migrants in Bangladesh; in 2004 and 2006, she conducted several repeat visits. Syeda is such
a gifted listener. Her genuine interest and kindness made people of various ages and backgrounds feel comfortable enough to share their lives with us. Her contributions to this study were invaluable. I feel very fortunate to have had the pleasure of working with all three of these women. They not only translated and assisted me in the data gathering process, but also made a great contribution to this study by sharpening my mind during the many lively discussions we had. I treasure the laughter, friendship, adventures and good humour (particularly when things took an unexpected course) we shared.

As for the fieldwork in Malaysia, I am very grateful to my friend Patrick Pillai. He is an authority in the field of migration in Malaysia and beyond, and encouraged me to proceed with the PhD when the idea first came up. I thank Patrick for sharing his insights during our discussions and email correspondence, and for his continuous encouragement and support throughout the project. I am greatly indebted to my friend Kenneth Perkins, who is general secretary of the Penang Textile and Garment Workers Union. He never ceased to assist me in my work: he not only provided me with knowledge and local contacts, but also took me out for lunch and for jogs through the hills with his running group. My heartfelt gratitude goes to Dato’ Anwar Fazal and his wife for the fruitful discussions we had and the assistance they provided. Azzizah Kassim, Celia Ng and Diane Wong shared their expertise with me, which was highly appreciated. I also thank Sepu for helping me to get in touch with Bangladeshi migrants and for sharing his experiences with me.

I am more than grateful to all my friends in Malaysia who made my stay a success (and truly enjoyable when I was not working, but sharing meals, making trips and going out dancing with them!). I thank Maura and Hai Long, Rachel Abraham, Kenneth Khoo, Sharuna Verghis, Michael Chai and Janet, Susan Siew, Elise Ong, and Karin and Maran.

In Bangladesh, I am deeply indebted to Hameeda Hossain, then-director of Ain O’Shalish Kendra (ASK), who took me in so graciously when I first arrived in Bangladesh. Chilpi’s interest and kind offer to accompany me during the first interviews with returned migrant women was highly appreciated. I am grateful to Meghna Guhathakurta for sharing her knowledge, friendship and contacts with me. I am also greatly indebted to Tasneem Siddiqui, who is an authority in the field of gender and migration in Bangladesh. Her expertise, engagement, enthusiasm and support were a great help and inspiration to me. I send a big thank you to Saiful Haque Asif of the Welfare Association of Repatriated Bangladeshis (WARBE). He and his colleagues generously shared with me their experiences as ex-migrants. Thanks also go to Lily Jahan of the Bangladesh Women Migration Association. I highly appreciate the work they all have done and are still doing. Finally, I thank Professor B.K Jahangir, Rita Afsar and Naseen Akhter Hussain for sharing their knowledge during several lively and interesting discussions.

I am most profoundly indebted of course, to the many Bangladeshi migrant women and men who shared their lives with me. I highly appreciate their generosity, espe-
cially as I know that at times their lives were such that they did not know whom to trust. They put up with my constant curiosity and questioning, welcomed me in their homes, and shared with me their stories, meals, laughter and – sometimes – tears. I greatly admire their courage in speaking out. This book is dedicated to you.

Following an invitation from Thanh-Dam Truong, I participated in the EU-funded Asia-Link doctoral students’ exchange programme, which allowed me to work for several months at the Gender and Development studies (GDS) centre at the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) in Bangkok in 2004. A big thank you goes to Thanh-Dam, Bernadette Resurreccion and the GDS in general. Stimulating discussions with students and staff at AIT were highly appreciated.

After my return to the Netherlands, my insights and writing were enhanced during discussions on draft chapters and papers with Willem van Schendel, Jeroen Doormernik, Margriet Poppema, Philomena Essed, Valentina Mazucatto and Steve Vertovec. I thank them all for their invaluable feedback. I am grateful to Sjoerd de Vos – who patiently and repeatedly answered my statistical questions – and to Els Veldhuizen, who made the maps.

I send my thanks to Patrick Henn for supporting me while I was writing the research proposal; although it already seems so long ago, it was a very crucial period. I also feel grateful for the support I received from my friends and fellow PhD students – particularly Frank den Hertog, Ilse van Liempt, Floor Smakman, Marli Hollands, Ellen Lammers, Cindy Horst, Blanca Garcés-Mascareñas, Nandita Shah, Nandita Gandhi and Udan Fernando. A big thank you also goes to my dear colleagues at the Fair Wear Foundation for their patience and support while I was finalizing this dissertation.

As for the financial side of things, I am greatly indebted to a dear family friend, Jacques Proutat, for lending me a very generous amount of money when I needed it, and for later turning it into a gift. My friend Christian Epp graciously lent me a substantial amount of money for an indefinite period of time and without asking for interest; I sincerely thank him for his big-heartedness and friendship. Finally, I am more than grateful to my mother, my grandmother and my grandfather for their very generous gifts: their financial contributions and continuous loving support were deeply appreciated and made my life unfold with ease and grace. Thank you for being such an important part in my life and for always believing in me.

Last but not least, I want to thank the various friends and family members I have not mentioned so far – in particular, Franki, Ann, Roberta, Michele, Ali, Analia, Christian, Ines, Linda, Jamal, Dorrit, Laura, Paulette, Simona, Jean and Alan. They have all greatly enriched my life. I thank them for their patience and belief in me during what at times seemed to be a never-ending project. They were there with understanding, laughter and humour whenever I got stuck or simply needed some diversion. I cherish your love and friendship.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Migration is a courageous expression of an individual’s will to overcome adversity and live a better life
Kofi Annan

Migration is not a new phenomenon; people have been on the move throughout history. However, both the magnitude and, more importantly, the complexity of migration have increased substantially in recent decades. In 2005, there were an estimated 191 million migrants worldwide. In other words, 3% of the world population had left their home countries for a year or more. Although it is often believed that most international migration consists of South to North flows, South to South migration is about as voluminous. In 2005, 62 million migrants from developing countries moved to more developed countries, while almost as many (61 million) moved from one developing country to another (Martin & Zürcher 2008:3). Asia, including the Middle East is the region in which most South to South migration takes place. Of all international migrants, 28% live in Asia, as compared to 34% in Europe and 23% in North America (UN 2007). Worldwide, nearly half of all migrants are women.

Migration and the intensification of global processes (globalization) are closely interlinked (Castles 2000; Skeldon 2000; Stalker 2002; Wickramasekera 2002:9). Globalization can be defined as the process of the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness – a process that is facilitated by modern information and communication technology (Castles 2000). At the heart of these intensified global contacts is a rapid increase in cross-border flows of all sorts: finance, trade, ideas, culture, media products, pollution and people (Castles, 2000:271). Global restructuring and foreign direct investment flows have not provided the employment needs of all economically developing countries within Asia. While some countries – for example, the Asian ‘Tigers’ – benefited economically and, over the past decades, increasingly faced labour shortages, other countries like Bangladesh, the Philippines and Indonesia gained less and witnessed large levels of unemployment. The increased economic disparities between countries, which have been further intensified by demographic factors, are at the core of the continuously large migration streams within Asia (Stalker 2000; Phizacklea 2003).

While the free flow of capital, goods and services is widely promoted by those who hold economic and political power, the flow of labour, and of people in general, is severely restricted. Immigration and cultural differences are seen as potential threats to national sovereignty and identity. However, countries tend to have a so-

2. It should be noted that figures are partly based on estimates, as many migrants are undocumented and hence not registered.
mewhat ambiguous position regarding migration: although they want to reduce the influx of migrants, many also want the cheap labour provided by migrants. Moreover, in an increasingly international economy, in which flows of people are inextricably linked to the movements of information, commodities and capital, it is difficult to open borders to the latter movements and close them to people. Consequently, a large percentage of migrants have entered host countries undocumented.

The trade in people has become a very lucrative business. As some argue, labour has become a commodity (Linard 1998:3; Wickramasekera 2002; Abella 2006). International labour migration has been expanding in Southeast Asia since the early 1980s, and now involves almost all countries in the region. Wealthier Southeast Asian economies, particularly Singapore and Malaysia, rely heavily on the labour of foreigners to sustain their economic growth. In these countries, migrants account for as much as 20-30% of the labour force (Jureidini 2003; Ford 2007). Some 6-7 million Asian contract workers reside outside their own countries. While numbers are up in the air, it is estimated that for every documented migrant worker in Southeast Asia, there is at least one undocumented migrant (Castles 2000:297; Skeldon 2000:378; Wickramasekera 2002:21; Abella 2006).

Although the scope of labour migration and the relevant immigration polices may differ from country to country, such migration within Asia is characterized by several salient commonalities: documented labour is virtually always temporary and strictly regulated, most of it is South to South migration and there is a feminization of migration. This study focuses on the migration experiences of Bangladeshi women and men who temporarily moved to Malaysia to work in labour-intensive factories. Below, I briefly discuss the relevance of this study in relation to the three aforementioned commonalities.

1.1 Temporary labour migration

Over the past decades, temporary labour migration schemes have been very popular in Asia and the Middle East. Such schemes are considered to allow more flexibility in the labour market than more permanent forms of migration. Migrant receiving countries operate temporary migration schemes in order to prevent permanent settlement. Temporary migrant workers often serve as ‘shock absorbers’: they are concentrated in those sectors that are subject to much greater volatility than the rest of

---

3. In popular language, undocumented migration is often referred to as ‘illegal’ migration. However, this term often wrongly criminalizes the migrant worker, and also implies that the migrant is to take the sole blame for his status. As studies have variously found, migrants are often deceived by traffickers and recruitment agents, without being aware of it (Wickramasekera 2002:2).

4. Another common feature is that the demand for foreign workers is often higher than the official supply. Closely related are the increasing number of undocumented workers and the burgeoning migration industry (Wickramasekera 2002:14).
the economy and can be easily laid off. They are generally employed in low-skill services, agriculture and labour-intensive manufacturing (Abella 2006:2-14).

Temporary migrant schemes, which until recently were out of vogue in Australia and the North, are again becoming popular as a means to manage labour immigration. However, these schemes have also become a source of great concern (Ruhs & Martin 2006:2). Temporary migration programmes restrict the rights of migrant workers. In many receiving countries, conditions are attached to temporary admission that effectively preclude the enjoyment of some basic labour rights and entitlements. The unequal treatment of temporary migrant workers compared to local workers has taken severe forms in countries where the organization of migration is left to job brokers and labour contractors, and where labour institutions such as trade unions are weak or prohibited (Abella 2006:2-18). There is often little incentive to protect the rights of migrant workers. As Ruhs and Martin (2006:4) pointedly put it: ‘more rights for migrants typically mean higher costs.’

1.2 South to South migration

In migration discussions, the focus is generally on South to North migration. This is reflected in the migration literature. Studies generally concentrate on permanent migration and issues related to border control and integration into the host country. There is a fundamental difference between the permanent or settlement migration that is prominent in Europe and North America, and the temporary or circular migration as currently witnessed in Asian and Middle Eastern countries, where migrant workers cannot obtain citizenship (OECD 2001; Abella 2006:5; Piper 2006:152). These differences are generally not acknowledged in theoretical discourses on migration. By taking permanent migration as the prevailing assumption, scientists largely ignore the reality of other types of migration (Piper 2006:150; Hugo 2006:211). This study fills this gap in our understanding by focusing on temporary migration processes, which are equally or sometimes even more important in terms of volume and contributions to countries of origin.

1.3 The feminization of migration

Until the late 1970s, it was widely believed that women’s participation in international migration was negligible.5 Those women who did migrate were generally assumed to be following their husbands. Nowadays it is common knowledge that female migrants often outnumber male migrants and that women frequently migrate in their own right. In North America and Europe, migrant women outnumber migrant men.

5. Estimates on migration classified by sex were first compiled and released by the United Nations Population Division in 1998. The figures reveal that in 1960, female migrants accounted for 48% of all migrants.
As for Asia, over the past few decades the number of Asian female migrants migrating on their own – that is, without husbands or families – has increased dramatically. In East and Southeast Asia, the number of female migrants is estimated to have surpassed the number of male migrants, albeit only marginally (Zlotnik 2003:3; ILO 2006).

Due to migration policies and gendered notions on labour, women are usually recruited for gender-specific jobs (such as domestic work), service-related professions and the entertainment industry (ILO 2006:1; Saptari 2006). The majority of female migrant workers in Asia are employed as domestic workers in the Middle East, Hong Kong, Malaysia or Singapore (Asis 2003). The situation of female domestic workers has been well documented (Lycklama 1995; Constable 1997; Tacoli 1999; Gamburd 2000; Parreñas 2001; Asis 2003; Constable 2003; Resurreccion 2004; Saptari 2006).

Large numbers of Asian women migrate undocumented. While some are aware of their status, others are told that their documents are legal. Many women and children end up in the entertainment sector or the sex industry. Abuse is very common and legal support is scarce (IOM, 2000). Factors that contribute to the situation are the large demand for overseas jobs, a lack of policy enforcement, gender discriminatory policies and the burgeoning recruitment industry.

Over the past decades, a growing number of migrant women (and men) were employed in the industrial export-producing sector in migrant receiving countries. Although this sector initially attracted young local women from rural areas, job opportunities in other sectors led to labour shortages in labour-intensive manufacturing. So far, however, little research has been conducted among international migrants in the industrial sector (Asis 2001:33).

Although women are a numerical majority in many cross-border flows, in general research on international migration has overwhelmingly and disproportionately focused on men (Massey et al. 2006:64). This study addresses this issue by focusing primarily on Bangladeshi women working in other Asian countries, specifically taking Malaysia as a case in point. The issue is not only about men and women as such. In any society, the expectations and roles that are collectively assigned to men and women differ, as is reflected in institutions, policies and opportunities. It is thus not surprising that migration can impact men and women differently, as shown by studies that have integrated gender into their analyses (Mahler & Pessar 2006:29; Curran et al. 2006:202; Massey et al. 2006). However, very few studies have looked systematically into gender and the possible differences in the migration experiences of men and women.

While an increasing number of migration scholars now insist that migration is a gendered phenomenon that requires more sophisticated theoretical and analytical tools (Donato et al. 2006:4), the majority of immigration studies are still conducted as though gender relations are largely irrelevant to the way the world is organized (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1999:566; Mahler & Pessar 2006:28). Therefore, this study integrates gender relations into the conceptual and analytical framework.
1.4 Focus of the study

This study focuses on Malaysia because it has one of the largest immigrant populations in Asia. Malaysia’s impressive economic development (it had average growth rates of 8% in the decade prior to the economic crisis) is largely based on export manufacturing. In the 1970s and 1980s, the industrial sector thrived on the massive influx of rural Malay women into the export-processing zones. Working conditions were bad and wages were low (Ong 1987; Daud 1985; Ng 2003). With the rapid economic development in the early 1990s, and more lucrative employment opportunities elsewhere, the industrial sector experienced labour shortages. Employers looked for new sources of cheap labour. Hiring international migrants was one important means to overcome the challenge of labour shortages and increasingly stiff international competition. Since 1990, about a third of all workers employed in the industrial sector have been temporary migrant workers from abroad (Rudnick 1996: The Star 17-03-2006). During the 1990s, Bangladeshi workers were the second largest migrant group in Malaysia.

Bangladesh is one of the largest labour sending countries in Asia: because the country is one of the poorest in the region and has high rates of unemployment, many people seek employment elsewhere. Remittances from Bangladeshi migrants are estimated to account for about 30% of the country’s foreign revenues (Siddiqui 2003). Until recently, Malaysia was the second largest emigration destination after the Middle East.

While a disproportionately small number of Bangladeshi women manage to migrate documented, many do so – or attempt to do so – undocumented (Siddiqui 2003). Typical of these women is the general societal taboo on female migration. In many societies, female migration is considered at odds with prevalent gender norms. Their migration contests the social construction of what is considered to be appropriate gender behaviour for women (Espin 1999; Beesey 2001; Blanchet 2002; Pessar & Mahler 2006; Sinke 2006:91).

This study focuses on why Bangladeshi women migrated and how their experiences impacted their lives during their migration and after their return. The fieldwork was carried out in both Malaysia and Bangladesh, and covered the pre-migration phase, the migration phase and the post-migration phase. In order to better understand the gender dynamics involved, the experiences of Bangladeshi migrant men are incorporated whenever possible.

Many of the issues that feature in the area of gender and migration are closely related to globalization issues. Globalization encompasses not only ‘big systems’, like the world financial order or migration systems; it is not only ‘out there’, but also ‘in here’ (Gardner 1994:12). Individuals are engaged in a complex of activities that are both embedded in and transform practices of globalization. Hence, migration is both a cause and a consequence of that process. To understand either the ‘global’ (international migration systems) or the ‘local’ (the impact of migration on individuals, families and communities), one must view each in the context of the other (Gamburd 2000; Resurreccion 2004:16). In other words, apart from understanding the underlying systems and structures, it is instructive to look into migrants’ personal
experiences. By including their experiences, this study complements more quantitative studies, which generally provide less in-depth information on why people migrate and how migration impacts their lives.

1.5 Outline of the book

In Chapter 2, the main question of the study is formulated and theoretical considerations are discussed, culminating in the conceptual and analytical framework of the study. Chapter 3 focuses on the structural context, namely the economic, political and sociocultural context, with specific reference to migration of the migrant sending country (Bangladesh) and the migrant receiving country (Malaysia). In Chapter 4, methodological issues and decisions are explored and the positions of the respondents, the researcher and the research assistants in relation to one another are discussed. Chapter 5 looks into the reasons why the Bangladeshi migrant women and men migrated. Chapter 6 explores the ways in which consent to migrate was obtained, and how the desire to migrate was materialized. The focus of Chapter 7 is on the working conditions and wages of the Bangladeshi migrant workers. Chapter 8 looks at social relations and Bangladeshi migrant workers’ dual embeddedness in Malaysia. Chapter 9 explores the post-migration stage, namely the consequences of migration and migrant women’s lives after their return. The findings of the study are synthesized in Chapter 10.
CHAPTER 2: ENGENDERING MIGRATION THEORY

Migration has received much academic attention in recent decades. A vast body of literature on migration theory has been formed from diverse disciplinary perspectives, as reflected in the different theoretical stances, focus points and methodologies used (Brettell & Hollifield 2000). Despite these differences, many common questions arise pertaining to the causes and consequences of migration. It is now recognized that transnational migration is a complex multidirectional process that spans micro, meso and macro levels of analysis.

Despite increasing scholarly interest, there has been little concerted effort to incorporate gender into theories of international migration (Boyd & Grieco 2003:1; Mahler & Pessar 2006:28; Piper 2006:139). Many still assume that migration is a gender-neutral process in which men and women have similar motivations and migration experiences. Based on these premises, migration theory effectively leaves little room to discern potential differences in incentives and migration experiences of male versus female migrants and the various ways in which gender influences the migration process. As far as the reasons for migration are concerned, regardless of the theoretical stance taken, economic reasons play a prominent role in many explanations of migration: people move to other places for jobs and higher wages. While there is much truth in this assumption, this study also examines possible additional reasons and factors that are embedded in economic needs and desires. It is argued that the causes and consequences of migration are multiple and are dependent on various social, cultural, political and economic factors and thus require multidimensional analyses (cf. Ryan 2002:111).

In many parts of the world, current migration flows differ from past patterns of permanent settlement. Most of the contemporary migration flows within Asia are temporary or circular in nature (Piper 2006). Migrants generally cannot bring their families to the country in which they work and reside. Temporary migration calls for a different analytical framework (Abella 2006). However, the vast majority of migration research and related theoretical endeavours focus on South to North migration and primarily concentrate on settlement migration and related issues.

In order to better understand the temporary labour migration of unskilled and semi-skilled women and men, this study draws on a multidimensional framework of analysis. In this chapter, the conceptual framework is developed by drawing from, elaborating on and gendering existing theoretical insights. First, a closer look is taken at the concept of gender.

1. While it is acknowledged that professionals and skilled workers also migrate, their migrations are beyond the scope of this study.
2.1 Why does gender matter?

The notion of gender helps to distinguish the roles, characteristics, expectations and ideals ascribed to men and to women in a given society. If men and women were to have equal positions in society that led to similar societal expectations and behavioural expectations for men and for women, it would be superfluous to speak of gender; however, that is not the reality. The definitions of femininity and masculinity as well as gendered social relations are socially constructed and change over time and space; they are not fixed, unambiguous or clearly demarcated. Gender relationships are renegotiated and recreated by people in their everyday interactions and are variably influenced by both local and global processes. Since gender roles are part of an individual’s habitus, many people are not aware of their own gendered notions. We are often unconsciously socialized to view particular gendered distinctions as natural, inevitable and immutable. However subtle, gender filters through all levels of society from micro-level relationships to macro-level policy formulations (Steenbeek 1995; Nencel 2001; Pessar & Mahler 2001; Boyd & Grieco 2003). Gender is thus a multifaceted concept that operates on a symbolic level in images of masculinity and femininity; on a level of individual and collective identity through meanings of sexual and other differences, which affect self-image and collective images; and on the level of the social structures that determine the availability of and access to resources (Chhachhi 2004:34, citing Scott 1988 and Sevenhuijsen 1998).

The findings from migration studies that include a gender perspective point at the different ways in which women’s and men’s migrations are influenced by gender. It is found that apart from, yet closely related to economic incentives, women’s migration motivations are often tied to prevailing gender norms. Some women are sent by male members of their families, while others are pursuing access to labour markets. Some women also hope to improve their sociocultural room to manoeuvre, which often includes being free from undesirable marital relationships or expectations. Gender relations also affects individuals’ decision-making power regarding their potential migration (i.e. Morokvasic 1983, 2003; Grassmuck & Pessar 1991; Truong 1996; Willis & Yeoh 2000; Kofman et al. 2000:24; Anthias 2000; Parreñas 2001, Asis 2003; Boyd & Grieco 2003; Phizacklea 2003; Constable 2003; Donato et al. 2006; Mahler & Pessar 2006). For migrant men, motivations for migration are often embedded in their gendered roles as wage earners and the prevalent definitions of masculinity.

It has been shown that men and women are often affected differently by emigration and immigration policies: job and migration possibilities are tied to a person’s sex (Willis & Yeoh 2000; Boyd & Grieco 2003; Phizacklea 2003; Constable 2003; Piper 2006). Likewise, the sociocultural and the gendered settings in receiving
countries often differ from those in home countries and entail different adjustments for male and female migrants. Migrants often become particularly aware of the relational and contextual nature of gender as they attempt to fulfil expectations that are related to identity and behaviour (Donato et al. 2006:6). Not surprisingly, the different social positions and incentives are found to influence migration decisions, experiences and activities during all stages of the migration process (Willis & Yeoh 2000). In short, the literature on migration that incorporates gender shows that women’s and men’s migration experiences often differ and are influenced by gender notions and relations.

Gender is only one of several explanatory components in migration, as it also interacts with other parameters and social divisions such as class, race and ethnicity (Anthias 2000; Mahler & Pessar 2006:29). Nevertheless, since gender is a principle that organizes social reality in various ways, it is somewhat surprising that it is not structurally incorporated in migration theories and analytical frameworks as an explicit and potentially explanatory component.

It is beyond the scope of this study to look extensively into how and why this neglect of gender in research occurs. It could be argued, however, that it is linked to a misconception about the concept of gender. Gender is often mistakenly regarded as being synonymous with inequality between the sexes, women’s disadvantaged position or ‘women’s issues’ in general. It is frequently believed to explicitly concern women’s migrations or women’s studies in general. Accordingly, as far as gender is recognized in migration theory, until recently it was generally considered as a variable or an additive, rather than a central theoretical principle (Anthias & Lazaridis 2000; Boyd & Greico 2003; Donato et al. 2006). Although the topics of the inequality and the deprivation of women feature in many studies that incorporate gender, they are only two of the many facets of gender. This bias may have contributed to the misperception of gender in migration studies.

Studies that focus on women’s migration often show that in many labour sending countries, power relations are skewed such that men can assert power more easily than women (Mahler & Pessar 2001). This power difference frequently results in men having, or appearing to have, a larger say in decision-making and more or easier access to both material resources (money, jobs) and immaterial resources (information, social networks). However, this differential is not always the case and can never be assumed as a given – although it is sometimes taken as such by scholars.

The actual mechanisms at work in gendered relations require adequate investigation. There are no clear-cut ‘women’s’ or ‘men’s’ incentives for or experiences of migration. The increasing number of studies in the past decade that have focused on the specific situations of female migrants have contributed importantly by filling this gap in migration literature (Kofman et al. 2000; Anthias 2000:16). However, gender cannot be reduced to looking at women only. Gendered migration studies that focus on both women and men have been rare until recently (Willis & Yeoh 2000; Donato et al. 2006; Mahler & Pessar 2006). Some have rightly warned that in their endeavours to correct the ‘invisibility’ of women in migration, researchers overemphasize the migration experiences of women and pay too little attention to
those of men. This type of research inadvertently undermines a gendered view of migration that seeks to explain the experiences of both males and females (IN- STRAW 1994; Boyd & Grieco 2003:3; Morokvasic, Erel & Shinozaki 2003:10; Mahler & Pessar 2006:51).

Although this study’s primary focus is on Bangladeshi migrant women, their situations and experiences are compared to those of their male counterparts in as far as we were able to collect data on them. The aim is to contextualize the lived realities of female migrants and the workings of gender within this transnational migration flow. By engendering migration theory, this study uncovers potentially gendered mechanisms that are at work and thus more accurately reflects reality, that is, migration dynamics and people’s transnational experiences. Since gender does not constitute a separate system but pervades all levels of society, I argue that to engender migration theory, a gendered lens needs to be built into all levels of analyses.

2.2 Crossing boundaries: towards an engendered theoretical framework

While some scholars have incorporated gender into their analytical frameworks, an all-encompassing theory of gender and migration has not been formulated – and this is hardly surprising given the different types of migration and the different backgrounds and contexts. As Anthias and Lazaridis (2000:12) point out, despite certain common themes, the heterogeneity of migrant women and men and their different situational and contextual circumstances do not call for a general theory of the role of gender in the migration process (see also Boyd & Grieco 2003:1; Calavita 2006:125). This is why the analytical framework applied in a given study on migration needs to have a built-in gender lens.

In Bangladesh, women’s migrations are often socially contested. Their migration is perceived to go against prevalent gender norms, in which women are generally regarded to be both ideologically and economically dependent on men. Although nowadays many women take jobs outside the home and therefore challenge this norm, women are traditionally not supported in finding work outside the home. Hence, women’s migration to a new country, a new place, involves negotiations over gendered spaces. To put it differently, apart from crossing physical boundaries between countries or continents of origin and destination, migration has implications for sociocultural boundaries related to class, gender and various demographic characteristics and roles (see also Anthias 2000; Morokvasic, Erel & Shinozaki 2003). Migration thus incurs change, as it involves crossing, stretching and redefining boundaries of various sorts. The nature of these changes or reformulations is given centre stage in this study in order to better understand people’s migration processes.

In recent years, academic attention in the migration literature concerning women has increasingly been on women’s transnational ties, bifocal identity formations and transnational familial responsibilities, particularly mothering (Willis & Yeoh 2000: xvii; Boyd & Grieco 2003:2). Another issue that has extensively featured in studies on female migration over the past decades relates to the emancipation or empower-
ment of women. These studies explore whether migration has reduced patriarchal control over the lives of migrant women (Morokvasic 1983; Phizacklea 1983; Pesar & Grasmuck 1991; Hondagneu 1994; Kibria 1995; Flagstad Baluja 2000).

Since the 1970s, scholars have argued that female migration can ‘liberate’ women by initiating a process of change from the traditional to modernity. Since women move from one social-gender environment to another, this move might evoke change as women are exposed to new gender norms in the receiving society. Moreover, migration might have a positive impact on women’s social and economic position through employment or economic remittances, which in turn can positively affect women’s decision-making power in the household (Lim 1995; Hugo 1995).

However, others have questioned the assumed emancipatory possibilities of migration; this is due to the exploitative character of much employment in host countries, meagre wages, abuse and the possibility that women may not have migrated of their own free will (Eelens 1992; Chantavanich 2001; Yeoh & Huang 2000). While some still argue in an either/or fashion, many contemporary studies refrain from making generalized conclusions. There are no clear-cut statements to be made concerning the emancipatory or gender-equality enhancing potential that migration may have. The multiple facets and complex nature of women’s positions and situations preclude one-dimensional conclusions concerning possible gains and losses (Anthias 2000:37; Mahler & Pessar 2001:455; Morokvasic 1984:893, 2003:128; Mahler & Pessar 2006). As is argued in this study, migration can have different and even contradictory effects for the same person. ‘Yes/No’ questions concerning emancipation are liable to evoke a flat analysis and discussions that centre on dichotomies, such as empowerment versus disempowerment, gains versus losses, or good versus bad. They leave little room for the many grey areas and ambiguities within an individual migrant’s complex lived reality.

To understand the experiences of individual migrants while acknowledging the different and sometimes contradictory effects that migration can have on people, the general research question (‘Why did Bangladeshi women migrate?’) was disaggregated into four specific questions:

1) What were the Bangladeshi migrant women’s goals and aspirations, and how are their socio-economic goals related to gender norms at a structural and an individual level?

2) To what extent did the women achieve their socio-economic goals, and what are the underlying structural and individual reasons behind their perceived successes or failures?

3) Are there differences between the experiences of female and male migrants?

4) How did the women’s experiences and participation in the migration process stretch, renegotiate or reaffirm sociocultural boundaries and gender norms.
In order to answer these questions comprehensively, an actor-oriented approach needs to be applied in which migrants and their individual situations, perceptions, motivations and experiences are analytically central (Steenbeek 1995). The application of the concept of a migrant’s agency provides a useful point of departure. Agency is often associated with the ability to identify one’s goals and act upon them. Agency encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose that actors bring to their activities. However, a point that needs to be emphasized is that agency is not necessarily synonymous with action. Action is only one component that defines this notion. Agency can include non-action – that is, passivity, accommodation or withdrawal, depending on what is at stake and on the strategies chosen within the context of one’s situated confinements (Wolf 1992:24; Kabeer 1999:438).

Moreover, as rightly argued by Amartya Sen (1977, in Peter 2003:17), apart from pursuing his or her own goals, interests and well-being, a person’s agency can include actions that are intended to improve the well-being of others, to conform to social and moral norms, or to honour personal commitments. Likewise, Sen (1985) and Peter (2003:17, 24) stress the fundamental difference between viewing a person as an ‘agent’ or regarding him or her as a victim. The full array of factors that influence how a migrant acts and reacts (or chooses not to act and react), and the motives for doing so, can become apparent only by considering the migrant’s agency in this broad sense.

A person’s agency and his or her contextual confinements are shaped by various quintessential individual characteristics – such as initiative, perseverance or timidity, to name a few (see also Mahler & Pessar 2001:447) – and by extra-personal factors that are related to structure. Structure in this context refers to the macro-level and meso-level institutions that shape or influence the society or global or regional system, and includes economic, political, judicial, social and cultural aspects. Structure demarcates boundaries and agents’ room to manoeuvre. Yet, structure is neither static nor independent of social actors, who produce and reproduce structure. As such, structure both gives rise to and confines people’s activities and identities. The specific relationships or dynamics between agency and structure are one of the fundamental focal points in social science.

Agency and structure have played dominant roles in the formulation of migration theories. While many theories hinge on the perceived explanatory supremacy of either agency or structure, others endeavour to integrate the two, as is expanded upon later in this chapter. In my view, it is the very connection – the interface between agency and structure – that helps to reveal migration dynamics and experiences. To discern these domains for analytical purposes, it is instructive to distinguish four relevant domains, namely the domain of self (the individual level), the domestic domain (the household), the domain of work and that of community. The definitions and importance of these domains are discussed in subsequent sections. Since the context of migration spans temporal and spatial dimensions, the process of temporary labour migration from Bangladesh to Malaysia can be divided into at least three phases, namely the pre-migration stage, the migration stage and the post-migration stage, after which the returnee may decide to migrate again, thus starting a new cycle.
In sum, this study employs a multidimensional framework of analysis. It applies a gendered lens that has an actor-oriented focus to the three stages of temporary migration. Since migration entails changes in migrants’ lives, looking into the nature and dynamics of the boundaries that are stretched or renegotiated in each of the domains sheds light on migrants’ complex lived realities. In the following sections, the analytical framework is further elaborated by focusing on each of the phases of the migration process.

2.3 The pre-migration stage

Migration theorists have focused extensively on the determinants of migration. This involves aspects related to incentives, the decision-making process and the actual realization of the decision to migrate. In other words: why do people migrate? Who makes the decision, and how is it contextualized within the domain of the household and the community? How does the decision to migrate materialize, and what role do social and institutional networks play? Although these questions and the steps taken towards actual migration are obviously interlinked, for analytical purposes it is helpful to look at each separately.

Why do people migrate?

Until the beginning of the 1980s, there were primarily two competing types of approaches in migration theory: functionalist approaches – which largely draw on neoclassical economic theory and take the individual and hence the micro level as the unit of analysis – and historical-structural approaches, which draw on neo-Marxist and structural political economy models by focusing on macro structures. Although since the 1980s theoretical approaches have increasingly combined aspects of these seemingly opposing paradigms, the dichotomous perspectives have not lost their theoretical significance for contemporary migration studies.

Advocates of the functionalist or neoclassical approach regard migration as the consequence of rational and economics-based decision making by individuals who aim to maximize returns to their human capital. Here, human capital is defined as a person’s labour, as influenced by his or her level of education and level. The migration decision is thus a response to wage and employment differentials. The potential migrant weighs the expected costs and benefits of employment in his or her current area against those in the potential destination area. This model, which was first introduced by Sjaastad (1962), was later adapted and amended by many other researchers. One such model, which became particularly popular among geographers, is Lee’s (1966) push and pull theory. This theory argues that migration is the result of the interplay between factors of attraction (pull) in potential destination areas and factors that are negative (push) in the area of origin. Push factors include unemployment, natural disasters and population pressure. Others introduced the notion of place utility, according to which a person migrates when his or her aspirations are not met by utility in the place of origin (Wolpert, 1965 in Spaan 1999:21). To put it
simply, functionalist approaches put the individual and his or her agency centre stage, and individuals’ migration decisions are seen as calculated, rational and economically induced.3 From the 1970s onwards, scholars who drew on neo-Marxist political economy, dependency and world systems theory criticized the functionalist approach. Central to the analytical frameworks of these historical structuralists are the broader social and historical forces that over time have led to an unequal distribution of economic and political power throughout the world. Migration is regarded as a macro social process caused by the structural relations of inequality in access to resources, political power and prestige within and across countries (Piore 1979; Meillassoux 1981). Migration is hence interpreted not as a free decision made by individuals, but as a decision that is more or less forced upon people by structural factors. Several related approaches were developed. Dependency theory emphasizes the unequal spatial development between the centre (developed capitalist economies) and the periphery (underdeveloped, dependent regions) that was caused by colonialism and is perpetuated by neocolonial relationships. Migration is seen not only as a response to spatial inequality but also as a social process through which it is reinforced. Additionally, world systems theory incorporates in its analyses the social relations of production in the source country itself and the differences between areas on the periphery and among social classes (Wood 1982; Sassen-Koo 1988). The concept of a capitalist unitary global system is central: development and migration are subject to it. It is argued that the penetration of capitalism in so-called underdeveloped areas undermines traditional ways of sustaining livelihoods. While popular consumer culture and investments from the powerful market economies flow to the ‘less developed’ areas, labour flows the other way (Massey et al. 1993:447). Kearney’s articulation of the modes of production theory (1986:344) suggests that for many people on the periphery, migration is the only option since the penetration of the capitalist mode of production undermines the productive sphere of the domestic economy and ultimately leads to lower revenues. While it is acknowledged that pre-existing forms of production on the periphery may coexist with those of capitalism, it is emphasized that traditional modes of production subsidize the capitalist mode of production by providing cheap labour. In short, proponents of historical-structural approaches focus on macro factors and emphasize the economic, political and social relations of inequality; prosperous countries benefit from this inequality and migration comes about due to structural forces, whereby individuals are left with little choice (Spaan 1999:49; Goss and Lindquist 1995:318; Kearney 1986). More recently, many of the critical analyses that have been formulated regarding global restruc-

3. Some authors who draw on the neoclassical approach have added a gender-differentiated factor in order to explain the additional determinants of female migration; i.e. the availability of marriage partners in the area of destination compared to the area of origin (Thadani & Todaro 1979; Wolfe & Behrman 1982). Here, the determinants for women are perceived to be ‘extraordinary’ as opposed to the ‘straight’ wage-related determinants for men. Moreover, the explanatory social factor (i.e. the availability of marriage partners) is narrowly defined and not embedded in wider sociocultural beliefs and behaviour (Chant 1992).
turing or globalization, including feminist writings, highlight similar mechanisms and start from related viewpoints (cf. Arya & Roy 2006).

Since these two theoretical approaches are based on opposing ideologies, the dichotomy has led to an unproductive polarization of migration theory. Neoclassical approaches rightfully highlight people’s agency, but fail to recognize that structural forces influence and constrain an individual’s agency. Similarly, whereas structuralist studies have been valuable in highlighting the macro aspects that influence migration – particularly by showing the embeddedness of migration in political and economic processes that transcend the local and the national realm (Sassen-Koob 1984) – the individuals’ own decisions are ignored and people are effectively defined as helpless victims of broader systems. Ironically, these paradigms share an important commonality: they are essentially economic in nature. People migrate to earn money (or more money) out of want or need. Other potentially related reasons to migrate are not considered significant for the decision-making process. The social, cultural, political and institutional dimensions of migration are subordinated to an economic logic (Schiller et al. 1992; Goss & Lindquist 1995:317). The fact that migration behaviour is largely structured along lines of gender, age, kinship, ethnicity and class is often not adequately recognized or addressed (Massey et al. 1998:185).

Starting in the 1980s, many attempts were made to identify intermediate variables that would enhance the articulation of micro- and macro-level explanations and overcome the agency-structure impasse. Social networks and households received much attention (Wood 1982; Fawcett 1989; Massey 1990). A social network is generally defined as a web of interpersonal interactions that incorporates relatives, friends or other associates forged through social and economic activities through which information, influence and resources flow (Massey et al. 1987). It is through these networks that migration takes place. Likewise, others have highlighted the pivotal role of the household or family in migration decision-making. Although it is a matter of debate whether these variables are necessarily the ‘missing links’ between micro- and macro-level factors, they undoubtedly play important roles.

Elements of both paradigms (the level of the individual as well as structural aspects) are incorporated in the analytical framework adopted for this research. Moreover, in order to move beyond economic determinism, this study includes the identification of migrants’ social location, which – as discussed by Mahler and Pessar (2001:445; 2006) – refers to a person’s position, which is created through such socially stratifying factors as class, race, gender, ethnicity, kinship, geography and education. These factors influence people’s access to resources and how and with whom they identify themselves. In combination with a person’s characteristics, his or her social location informs that person’s agency and his or her potential mobility across space. People’s social locations extend over all domains and evolve through the interfacing of factors at the macro, micro and intermediate level.

The migration system – the conglomerate of structural factors that shape and influence migration – has been identified as an interface of factors related to agency and structure. A migration system consists of groups of countries that exchange relatively large numbers of migrants with each other. Relevant aspects identified
pertain to the social, demographic, political, judicial and economic context of both
the home and the host countries – the concomitant bilateral ties – and include various sorts of social networks (Kritz & Zlotnik 1992; Klaver 1997; Castles 2000).

Although migration policies receive considerable attention in migration studies, the investigation of the gender implications of immigration and emigration policies at the state level, and of the inter-state dynamics as reflected in bilateral agreements, deserves more attention from scholars who are attempting to understand migration dynamics (Piper 2006:147; Calavita 2006:104).

Since the 1990s, theories of transnationalism have been rapidly adopted, adding greatly to the understanding of transnational migration. Instead of regarding migration as a once-in-a-lifetime move from native country to host country, as it was viewed previously, the transnationalist approach to migration is non-linear and multidirectional. The main focus lies on the economic, sociocultural and political transnational ties that migrants and their affiliates maintain within the diaspora and with their home country. These transnational ties are believed to be pivotal and an inherent part of the lives of those involved.4 Within this framework, it is argued that transnational ties and communities impact aspiring migrants’ conception of being or of potentially being part of these collectives, and hence influence their assessments regarding the possibilities and potential benefits of their own or a family member’s actual mobility (Vertovec 1999; Boyle 2002:1; Guarnizo 1998:52; Vertovec 2004). Before taking a closer look at the networks that may assist in making migration happen, I first examine the context in which decisions to migrate are taken.

The decision to migrate: the role of the household

Many scholars have rightly argued that decisions are generally not made in isolation but within a social context and a larger social unit, very often that of the household or family.

Some of the earliest theorists who incorporated households in migration theory define households as bounded units of production and consumption, and this view is still held today. These units pool resources, including labour, and make joint decisions regarding the allocation of these resources for the common interest in order to assure their reproduction. The migration of individual members or of the entire household is seen as a strategy to achieve a fit between resources at the household level (such as land or capital), alternatives to generating monetary or non-monetary income, and the household’s consumption needs (Boyd 1989:645; Wood 1982:313; Stark 1991). This model, which is also called the household strategies approach, purports that decisions are made in the best interest of all those involved. In his new home economics models, Becker introduces the concept of a benevolent dictator who is inherently altruistic in making the household decisions (Folbre 1988:248).

4. Although this partly resembles writings on social networks, it is more encompassing since it includes institutionalized ties, multiple locations and actors connected within the diaspora.
This patriarchal figure has internalized all the needs of his family members and will, it is assumed, decide on the best interest for all (Findley 1987:207). Opponents have forcefully argued that proponents of household models naively assume that relationships within the household are altruistic and egalitarian. Individual interests are conflated with common interests, as individuals and households are used interchangeably as though they were one and the same unit (Wolf 1990; Grasmuck & Pessar 1991; Kofman et al. 2000; Willis & Yeoh 2000; Phizacklea 2003). Goss and Lindquist (1995:328) speak of the ‘peculiar romanticism’ in assumptions that imply that:

Somehow, members of Third World households, not burdened by the individualism of Western societies, resolve to cooperate willingly and completely, each according to their capacities, to collectively lift the burden of their poverty.

Households cannot be assumed to be cohesive units: struggles over meanings and decisions do occur. Power relations within households are frequently uneven and depend on gender, age and status, and decision-making processes are often complex. Likewise, individuals’ interests may not converge. The voices of household members who have less decision-making power (in many societies, the children and women of the family) are often not acknowledged, which influences decision-making processes. Likewise, it should be noted that households are not static: family characteristics and people’s positions change over time, as does the balance of household power relations (Wolf 1990:44, 1992; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994:55; Kofman et al. 2000). In order to capture the dynamics that are at stake, the decision-making process should be incorporated in any analysis that seeks to understand migration.

Proponents of household strategy approaches have generally been criticized for not empirically investigating how these strategies and decision-making processes evolve within the household (Grasmuck & Pessar 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; UN 1995; Oishi 2005). Little work has been done in mainstream migration studies to understand how the decision to migrate is actually made. However, this critique can also be applied to studies on female migrants (Lim 1995; Chantavanich 2001). Although scholars often make statements about the limited decision-making power of female migrants, a review of the literature on women and migration reveals that the decision-making process and the specific actors involved have received only modest attention.

It is instructive to take a closer look at the aforementioned literature in relation to the ‘Why migrate?’ question. The earliest studies on women and migration date back to the 1980s, when two main streams of literature evolved. The first focused

---

5. Some widely quoted scholars study gendered migration by using a model that they somewhat confusingly also call the household strategies approach (see Radcliffe 1986; Chant & Radcliffe 1992; Chant 1998). Although the authors do not refer to the literature on ‘mainstream’ household strategy models, they evidently define the concept differently, by incorporating issues concerning decision making, power relations and sociocultural expectations of gender.
on internal migration and female employment in multinational corporations in free trade zones (FTZs) in Central America and Southeast Asia (Elson & Pierson 1981; Ong 1987; Heyzer 1989), while the second focused on female migrants in the USA and Europe, most of whom were employed in sweatshops or the service sector (Sassen-Koob 1984; Morokvasic 1983; Fernandez-Kelly & Garcia 1988).

This literature initially utilized the structural-historical framework and Marxist analysis, and focused primarily on the structural economic aspects that affected women adversely, particularly the exploitative conditions under which they worked. Women were perceived to migrate out of sheer economic need and to have little choice in the matter. Although these studies contributed significantly to the knowledge on female migration and the influence of economic and political structures and conditions of work, they give only a partial representation of female migrants’ realities and women’s perceptions of their own lives. Experiences and motivations were rarely included (Grasmuck & Pessar 1991; Gandhi & Shah 2002:8). As Matthei (1997:40) observes:

In such analyses gender distinctions in labour migration are often deemed significant only in that women represent more, and men less, exploitative sources of labour. Missing in most of these studies is any sense of women’s agency in the migration process.

As Mirjana Morokvasic (1983:18) pointedly notes: ‘The woman remains silent and invisible, present as a variable, absent as a person.’

The literature on female migrants has grown rapidly since then, with a burgeoning literature on female migrants working as domestic workers or in the entertainment sector in both the global North and the global South. Women’s individual situations and voices have increasingly been incorporated in studies on women and migration. However, different answers are given to the question why women migrate. To some extent this is hardly surprising, as the contexts of these studies often differ in terms of the countries of origin and destination, and of the migrants’ social locations, migration status and jobs. Various aspects and motivations can be at stake and lead to different experiences and conclusions. In some instances, however, the context and the social location of the group of women studied are similar, yet the general interpretations of why these women migrate conflict. In the example of Filipino migrant women employed as domestic workers, the studies by Yeoh & Huang (2000) and Barber (2000) stress that women’s migrations are largely induced by their sense of responsibility for their families back home, whereas studies by Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994), Tacoli (1999), Asis (2001), Parreñas (2001:66) and Constable (2003) found that many women migrate in order to improve their own lives and to enlarge their
gendered space. 6 To some extent, these different conclusions seem to reflect the agency/structure divide and the different viewpoints and ideologies of the authors.

Many scholars have argued that women’s migrations are largely sacrificial. It is thought that women migrate predominantly out of feelings of responsibility for their family members; their migrations are seen as embedded in their roles as dutiful daughters or altruistic mothers. In other words, migration is not a freely made decision or a means to improve a woman’s own life or life-choices.

As for the decision-making process, it is frequently argued that many women are sent abroad or are persuaded to migrate by more powerful household members, such as fathers or husbands, in order to benefit the entire household (Chant 1992; Bjeren 1997:242; Barber 1997; Yeoh & Huang 2000; Chantavanich 2001; Oishi 2005; Arya & Roy 2006). While this scenario has been found to be the case in several studies, such conclusions are not always rooted in thorough investigation, but are based on theoretical inferences.

Other studies have shown that women frequently migrate not (or not only) to earn money for their families but also to improve their personal situation in terms of both economic means and social space; in other words, they migrate in order to enlarge their room to manoeuvre or to escape an unhappy or unwanted situation or marriage (Morokvasic 1984, 2003; Grasmuck & Pesar 1991; Tacoli 1999; Kofman et al. 2000; Gamburd 2000; Phizacklea 2003). Although a woman’s decision to migrate is not necessarily a free choice in the sense that she has viable alternatives, it is often found to be a conscious and active decision to improve her personal life.

Although the studies that highlight sacrifice may appear to be at odds with those that point to ‘choice’, economic need and the desire to help one’s family can go hand in hand with incentives of a more personal character. In-depth studies that focus on the ‘Why migrate?’ question and draw on qualitative research methodologies that include extensive interviews and frequent visits, conclude that migration decisions are often complex and somehow contradictory. While women may emphasize that they are migrating for the sake of their families, other personal reasons are often revealed later on and found to be equally important (Grasmuck & Pessar 1991; Tacoli 1999; Asis 2001; Phizacklea 2003). These studies show that women often present incentives in a manner that complies with sociocultural norms within the household and beyond. It thus appears that at times, gendered and limited positions are actually used to obtain desired goals.

The household is a crucial concept in any account of migration, but as Phizacklea (2003:86) highlights, it can be influential in very diverse ways. In a detailed study

---

6. Similarly, for Sri Lanka the studies by Eelens (1995) and Oishi (2002) emphasize the general sense of responsibility out of which women migrate, whereas Gamburd (2000:144) points to some women’s agency in trying to actively improve their own lives and escape from particular family demands.

7. The discussion on the decision-making regarding female workers’ employment also features prominently in the vast literature on FTZs and women factory workers. These studies found that the decision concerning a woman’s (usually a daughter’s) employment was often made by the head(s) of the households (see Kung 1983; Greenhalgh 1975 for Taiwan; Radcliffe 1986 for Peru; Singhanetra-Renard & Prabhudhanitisarn 1992 for Thailand).
among Asian female domestic workers in the UK, Pizacklea found that not only had the majority of the women made the migration decision based on their own desires and initiative, but also that a substantial number had informed their families of their plans only after they had arranged their migrations. Oishi’s (2002) conclusions are similar for a large percentage of the female migrants she studied in Asia: family members had not played a role in the decision making. To this end, migrants often rely on strong relationships outside the household, namely external social support systems, which can lead to opportunities that surpass the household level (Kofman et al. 2000:28). Thus, the authority of the head of the household may at times be circumvented by activating social networks.

In order to better understand decision-making dynamics, the notions of ‘cooperative conflict’ and ‘bargaining power’ are included in the analytical framework of this study. These concepts, as discussed by Sen (1990) and Agarwal (1994), are insightful for understanding how migrants strategize to transform potential conflict into consent in cases where they want to migrate, or if they did not want to migrate, how and why they ended up going after all. A household is conceptualized as an arena of ‘cooperative conflict’. Members face a double-edged problem: one ‘edge’ involves cooperation – which adds to the total units of availabilities, namely resources – while the other involves conflict over the ways in which these availabilities are divided among household members. The final outcome of these cooperative conflicts is determined by each member’s bargaining power. Factors that influence a person’s bargaining power are related to his or her age, sex and marital status, in combination with what is commonly regarded as his or her appropriate gender role.

Another factor that influences a person’s bargaining power is his or her fallback position, that is, the personal assets that impact an individual’s long-term security. The determining factors of someone’s fallback position are private ownership and control over assets (e.g. land), access to employment and other income-earning sources, and access to external social support systems, immaterial and material means.

In short, within the domestic domain, individuals hold different positions and may have different interests, obligations, rights and access to resources. Members are regularly engaged in bargaining, negotiations and conflict. Individuals’ positions and household dynamics are closely related to local gendered notions of identities and responsibilities (Chhachhi 2004:37). However, an individual’s fallback position, personal characteristics and personal relations within the household also play important roles.

Household power relations and the dialectic of cooperation and conflict are not easy to discern. However, certain dynamics can be revealed by focusing on the process in which a particular decision (e.g. to migrate) was made. For some people, relationships that are non-familial may be more supportive than marital or familial ties. These relationships may strongly enhance a person’s bargaining power or be complementary in the decision-making process by creating access to material (money, job offers) and immaterial resources (information, networks) beyond the household.
How does the idea of migration materialize?

In order to actualize migration plans, assistance is needed from those who can help to arrange the money, contacts and papers that are needed to enter another country. Generally, various individuals are involved: friends and family members as well as institutional actors. As the extensive literature on social networks has pointed out, such networks can provide potential migrants with information about destinations and options, by offering contacts with potential employers, recruiters or people smugglers, and can help to obtain funds for migration fees (Massey et al. 1993; Klaver 1997). The social network approach has been criticized for the idealization of human ties in labour sending countries. The assumption that over time everyone will have access to a network may be somewhat naive (Goss & Lindquist 1995:330). For many migrants, social networks are not the only catalysts for migration or even the primary facilitators.

In many parts of the world, migration has increasingly been formalized and turned into a thriving industry. Asia is a case in point. Looking into the commercialization of migration is therefore pivotal to understanding transnational patterns in this region, where many migrants receive information, jobs and work permits via recruitment agents (Goss & Lindquist 1995:329; Boyle 2002; Phizacklea 2003:87). To this end it is helpful to assess what Goss and Lindquist (1995) call the migration institution. This notion refers to the complex recruitment networks that consist of formal and informal actors, ranging from agencies and employers to intermediaries and moneylenders who cross boundaries of states and locales. As the flow of information about migration becomes a commodity, it can be manipulated for profit. Access to practical information related to migration and the jobs that are available overseas is a valuable resource, and it is often concentrated in the hands of a few brokers, agents and entrepreneurs. The assumption of neoclassical approaches that migrants are knowledgeable about wage levels and working and general conditions in the region of destination often does not hold. Many aspiring migrants are not fully or correctly informed, and their decisions may be based on partial information.

Thus, perceptions of the situation in the receiving country should be considered, as they might play a larger role in the decision to migrate than actual facts concerning jobs and conditions. Lucrative images of destination countries, combined with individual incentives and economic deprivation, perpetuate the migration myth of promising futures in faraway lands. Although information, ideas and images can be acquired through the first-hand accounts conveyed by people one knows and trusts, people are often also influenced by the stories disseminated through transnational grapevines or told by dubious brokers.

Scholars working on female migration have stressed that most studies on social networks fail to compare and contrast the networks of male versus female migrants (Lim 1995; Chantavanich et al. 2001). However, some studies have indicated that these networks differ (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994:96; Matthei 1997; Mahler & Pessar 2006). Furthermore, the role of gender within the migrant institution has hardly been explored.
In order to understand how migrants have materialized their desire to migrate, it is necessary to identify the migrant institution at hand, including all the informal and formal contacts that are mobilized.

To understand how migration is actualized, it is instructive to look at the assets that people draw on during the pre-migration stage in order to obtain consent, cooperation from allies, and access to social and economic resources. Bourdieu (1977, 1986) emphasized the mutual embeddedness of economic and social life. People’s efforts to gain support in tangible or intangible matters are seen as paramount in striving to enlarge economic capital (Bourdieu 1977, 2005); the former is generally necessary to obtain the latter. To reveal these interconnections, Bourdieu (1977, 1986, 1990) introduced the notions of social, cultural and symbolic capital, which have since been employed by many scholars.8

Social capital has received considerable attention in social science. By far the most common function attributed to social capital is its role as a source of network-mediated benefits beyond the immediate family. Generally speaking, social capital can be defined as the social resources that derive from a person’s personal ties and enable him or her to achieve a desired goal (Coleman 1990; Lin 1999:34). Massey and Espinosa (1997) operationalize the social capital of migrants as the relations that migrants have with individuals who have migration experience and the effects of these relations on migration.

Symbolic capital explains the logic of the ‘economy of honour’ and ‘good faith’ (Bourdieu 2005:2). It refers to the sum of cultural recognition that an individual can acquire through the skilful manipulation of the system of symbols. Although the roots or sources of symbolic capital can be almost anywhere as long as actors perceive and recognize their existence (Rankin 2002), they often include the availability, creation and maintenance of various social relationships of value among kin and the wider community. Key aspects are honour and prestige, a good reputation and good social standing in the community (Kabeer 2000:44). The other forms of capital become meaningful and socially effective only through the process of symbolic translation (Bourdieu 1977; Siisiäinen 2000:13). Symbolic resources thus assist in obtaining other resources.

Cultural capital is defined as the habitus of cultural practices, knowledge and demeanours learned through exposure to role models in the family and elsewhere (Portes 1998:5; Bourdieu 1977, 2005:2). It thus refers to the advantages of having familiarity with and access to the dominant culture, which ultimately varies by class.

Human capital is another frequently employed form of capital – although the notion is rejected by Bourdieu as being too narrow and economistic. However, the notion is helpful in the current context as it also incorporates individuals’ qualities. Human capital or human resources can be defined as individual traits and characteristics that enhance performance with respect to some instrumental outcome. The notion embraces not only performance-enhancing knowledge or experiences – for

---

8. In this study, the term ‘resources’ or assets is generally be employed instead of ‘capital’ in order to underline the supra-economic, social dimension of these qualities.
example, education or experience in the local labour market – but also personal traits, such as courage, perseverance or determination (Coleman 1990; Singer & Massey 1998:568), which are referred to as quintessential characteristics (Mahler & Pessar 2001). Although these aspects are often not easily discerned, they can be of vital importance in determining someone’s migration.

Finally, economic capital or resources refer to the material, often financial means through which people meet their material needs and wants; people utilize the above-mentioned resources to reach their material goals. Although migration itself is a strategy to obtain material goals, a potential migrant needs to have access to the financial means to materialize his or her venture, that is, the means to pay the migration fee.

Gender plays a role in the process of accessing the various resources that people draw on in the process prior to and during their migration, and influences how access to financial means, contacts, permits and jobs are leveraged. Therefore, it is instructive to investigate separately the pre-migration process of potential migrant men and that of potential migrant women.

Summary

The above discussion shows that the factors and forces that influence people’s decisions, motivations and possibilities to migrate are complex, diverse and gendered. At the macro level, the migration system sets the framework, that is, the structural conditions in which migration flows come about, are sustained, and increase or dwindle. This level encompasses the sending and receiving countries’ positions within the global economy; the structural context of both countries, that is, their economic, political, sociocultural and judicial contexts; the relations between these countries in various areas; and specific agreements on conditions of entry and employment. Together, this constitutes the macro framework within which migration takes place (Chapter 3).

At the micro level, the individual’s motivations and context are important. Motivations and decisions reflect a person’s social location, identifications, personal characteristics, fears and future hopes. These decisions and motivations are often related to the household, or to the position within the household, and thus are likely embedded in household dynamics (Chapters 5 and 6).

Finally, the meso level constitutes the realm of negotiations and interaction. This includes both the decision-making process within the household regarding migration, and the various actors involved and the nature of the resources utilized to make migration possible, namely the migrant institution (Chapters 5 and 6). During the subsequent stage – the actual migration – the interrelations and dynamics within the various domains become more pertinent.

---

9. The widely used definition of the OECD reads that human capital refers to ‘the knowledge skills, competences and other attributes embodied in individuals that are relevant to economic activity’ (Schul- ler 2001).
2.4 The migration stage

Issues related to immigration are among the most researched topics in migration studies. Generally, these studies focus on migration to North America, Europe or Australia and concern long-term or settlement migration, with a particular focus on immigrants’ adaptation and integration. Consequently, migration theories and analytical frameworks are often less suitable for the analyses of short-term, contract migration. Residency is not an option for most temporary migrants. Issues pertaining to the need to return home are prominent, even if temporary migration may ultimately result in circular migration.

Studies on transnationalism are arguably most suitable when studying temporary migration. Although most studies on transnationalism focus on migration flows to North America or Europe and also concern settlement migration, the theoretical framework is applicable to more transient flows of mobility (Morokvasic 2003:115). As Caglar (2001:607) put it:

(...) transnationalism (...) makes visible the increasing intensity and scope of circular flows of persons, goods, information and symbols triggered by international labour migration. It allows an analysis of how migrants construct and reconstitute their lives as simultaneously embedded in more than one society.

The literature on transnationalism suggests that incorporation and transnationalism are concurrent processes: immigrants become part of the receiving country and its institutions, while maintaining ties with their countries of origin (Itzigsohn & Giorguli-Saucedo 2005:900). Although some have argued that transnationalism is nothing new, transnational scholars rightly point to the fact that although migrants have always maintained connections with their homelands, transnational communications were never as intensive, regular and complex as they are now (Portes et al. 1999; Foner et al. 2000; Vertovec 2003). This intensification – which is a result of modern communication technology and cheaper and faster means of transportation – in combination with stringent immigration rules and regulations, has led to profound changes in the lives of contemporary migrants. This is of particular relevance to temporary migrants: a transnational focus is often amplified, as short-term work permits impose serious space and time limitations on migrants’ presence in host countries. Vertovec (2003) refers in this context to ‘migrants’ bifocality’, that is, their dual embeddedness in terms of actual orientation in their daily lives. Or, to put it differently, a sense of simultaneous awareness of what is happening ‘here’ and ‘there’, namely in the place of immigration and in the country of origin, or in other places within the diaspora.

Transnational orientations and interaction are not evenly spread among groups or families (Vertovec 2004:977). The scope and intensity of a migrant’s transnational interactions depend to some extent on that person’s migration status (i.e. being documented or undocumented) and socio-economic position (Portes 1997:812). As Phizacklea (2003:80) points out, the fortnightly call home made by a poor Sri Lankan domestic worker in the Gulf States and the small amount she remits from
time to time, are hardly of the same nature as the transnational connections of a successful cosmopolitan business entrepreneur. Nevertheless, whether transnational contacts are intense, loose or largely symbolic, migrants are often multiply embedded in different societies. So far, most studies have focused on social institutions of transnationalism. To balance the picture, we need insights into how transnationalism impacts the everyday lives of individuals (Vertovec 2004:973).

Everyday transnational practices are not neatly compartmentalized, nor are their consequences (Guarnizo 2003). Nevertheless, for analytical purposes — that is, to understand the workings of transnationalism in migrant’s daily lives — it is helpful to deconstruct their lived realities into four domains, namely that of self, the domestic domain, the domain of work and the community domain (see model 2.1). Looking at each domain separately sheds light on specific features and issues of migrants’ dual embeddedness and bifocality. In reality, however, the boundaries and characteristics of these domains are fluid and overlap: the private and the public sphere intersect and strongly influence one another. In the final analyses of this study, they are brought together again as one, highlighting their relevant interconnections.

**Figure 2.1: Dual domain embeddedness during migration**

The domain of work

Documented migrants in Malaysia are legally bound to the employers they were recruited for in the first place. As soon as they stop working for the employers they were recruited for, they become ‘illegal’ and are required to leave the country. Hence, the domain of work plays an overarching role in the lives of temporary migrants.

Work-related issues have received much attention in academic as well as policy-oriented studies that focus on female migrants in Asia and the Middle East. Many studies have highlighted the prevalence of exploitation. Female migrants are often found to be vulnerable both as migrants and as women (Lim & Oisho 1996; Wille 2001; Parreñas 2001; Arya & Roy 2006). The vast majority of these studies focus on
domestic workers, women working in the entertainment sector or trafficked women. Aspects that have been stressed are flaws in the recruitment process and vulnerability to exploitation and abuse at the workplace. Underpayment and excessively long working hours are common (Lycklama & Nijenholt 1995; Wille 2001). There is often little institutional support from either unions or NGOs. Male and female migrant workers depend largely on their own strengths as far as unjust working conditions are concerned (Asis 2003; Piper 2006).

Although a large percentage of female migrants work in the aforementioned sectors, not all of them do. A notable gap in the literature on female migration is the limited knowledge of and focus on female migrants who work in the industrial sector (Asis 2001:33). The working environment and hence the experiences of factory workers differ to some extent from those of domestic workers and entertainers. The body of literature that is of particular relevance with regards to the specific working experiences of international migrant factory workers is the vast body of work on female factory employment. It includes studies on internal migration and women working in free trade zones (FTZs) in Southeast Asia (Daud 1985; Ong 1987; Heyzer 1989; Wolf 1992; Saptari, 1995, 2000; Gandhi & Shah 2002; Chhachhi 2004). Whereas earlier studies predominantly focused on harsh and unfair working conditions, more recent studies acknowledge and look into the fact that notwithstanding such conditions, many female factory workers regard their work as contributing positively to their lives (Wolf 1992; Pearson 1998; Mills 1999; Gandhi & Shah 2002; Chhachhi 2004).

To understand the working experiences of migrant workers in Malaysia’s industry, Amrita Chhachhi’s (2004) concept of ‘gendered labour regimes’ is a useful departure point for an exploration of what could be called a ‘migrant labour regime’. Chhachhi, who studied factory women in India, defines gendered labour regimes as:


With Burawoy (1985), Chhachhi looks into modes of labour management. Factory regimes as defined by Burawoy (ibid., 8, in Chhachhi 2004:30) refer to the interplay of the labour process and the set of rules, principles, beliefs and customs that govern production relations. Factory regimes are distinguished from one another according to the degree of state intervention and that of inter-firm competition. The absence of state intervention allows the dominance of a ‘despotic’ factory regime – a repressive system in which workers are completely dependent on employers. It is purported that when the state starts to intervene and regulate industrial relations, thereby assuring such rights as minimum wages and social security and implementing other legal regulations, a more hegemonic factory regime comes into play. The state then, though institutionally separate, regulates relations between capital and labour, and coercion is replaced by relative consent (Chhachhi 2004:30). As Chhachhi (ibid.)
points out, other factors such as the gendered and hierarchical character of the labour market also play a role in workers’ potential access to employment and their working conditions.

Empirically, factory regimes often differ depending on local circumstances. In Malaysia, the state [1] plays a proactive role in the country’s economic development and industry. Labour migration is highly institutionalized and governed by state policies.

Legislation on migration in both the sending and the receiving countries is of concern. Although legislation may strengthen the position of a migrant worker, it can also weaken it. A pertinent question that deserves attention is the extent to which migrant workers are protected under Malaysia’s labour laws. Of particular interest in the context of this study’s ‘migrant labour regime’ are migrant workers’ experiences on the work floor [2]. What are the working conditions and payments? And are there differences in working conditions, treatment experiences and payments between female and male migrants on the one hand, and between migrant and local workers on the other hand? Although it is beyond the scope of this study to fully incorporate the latter question, some important observations can be made based on secondary sources and interviews with key persons. What position do migrant workers take versus their employers when disputes over working conditions arise [3]? As Chhachhi (ibid., 32) rightly argues, laws and legal entitlements alone are not sufficient to distinguish between different labour regimes. The actual implementation of these entitlements is what matters. As she points out, law enforcement is often the result of workers’ organization and struggle, which takes time to materialize. For migrant workers, these issues may entail other factors, as they are not citizens and, in practice, often have fewer rights.

In the case of international migrant workers in Malaysia, issues related to the labour market [4] are closely related to migration institutions, that is, the recruiters and middlemen who contact or are contacted by employers and who arrange work contracts and permits. While familial ideologies are often reconstructed and replicated within the workplace, factory women’s norms, values and views on gender roles are found to intersect with an awareness of rights derived from the workplace (ibid., 38). Although they are far from their homelands, migrants generally continue to be part of their original households. Nevertheless, since migrants are employed in a social environment that has a set of norms and values that is different from the set in the home community, different and probably even more complex dynamics may be at stake.

As Baud (1992) and others (e.g. Gandhi & Shah 2002) have pointed out, the sphere of production and the impact that women’s factory employment has on their lives cannot be understood in isolation from the sphere of reproduction – the domestic domain and wider social relations. Focusing on the domain of work in conjunction with the other domains (that of self, the domestic domain and the community

---

10. In line with Moore (1994), Chhachhi (2004:36) calls these local theories of entitlement ‘socially and historically specific views about the rights, responsibilities and needs of particular individuals’.
domain) sheds light on the underlying context, namely the way in which work is perceived and approached, and the changes it occasions in the lives of migrant women.

**The domain of self**

As migrants cross physical borders, they also cross emotional and behavioural boundaries. Becoming a member of a new society stretches in several ways the boundaries of what is possible. Studies on women’s migration have highlighted that spending time across borders reshapes and potentially transforms migrants’ perceptions of self. As migrants’ lives and roles are changed throughout the migration process, the way migrants identify themselves may also change to some extent (Espín 1999:20; Yeoh & Huang 2000; Suárez-Orozco & Chin 2006). A closer look at identities is instructive.

As has been highlighted, identities are multiple and constantly shifting over time and space. The construction of identity is the product of social interaction and social experience. Identities are made up of such aspects as gender, class, ethnicity, age, religion, education, marital status, profession, place of origin and sexual preferences. Part of one’s self-identification is conscious: one may activate one or more of these subject positions, depending on how one chooses to represent oneself in a given context. The activation of subject positions can also be external. People may be forced into categorizations of identity that are not of their own choice. Consequently, tensions may arise between social representation and self-representation (Butler 1990; Moore 1994; Hastrup 1995; Chhachhi & Pittin 1996; Nencel 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Chin 2006:178). Thus, when looking at ‘self’ at any given time and in any given context, three aspects can be distinguished: how one identifies or sees one’s self, how one wants to be seen by others and how one is regarded by others.

While people’s self-identification is to some extent a conscious process, it partly derives from internalized social norms and values. Bourdieu refers to ‘habitus’ – a set of dispositions that generate practices and perceptions and guide social interaction and behaviour in a given community or society (Bourdieu 1977, 1990). The power of the habitus derives from the thoughtlessness of habit and habitation, as opposed to the thoughtfulness of consciously learned rules and principles. Social actions and behaviour are produced as a matter of routine, without explicit reference to a body of codified knowledge (Jenkins 1992:76). A person’s habitus is shaped by his or her upbringing, experience and position within the community. It is ‘inside the head’ of an actor. Habitus thus sets limits and boundaries by underpinning people’s adherence to the social order by ‘naturalizing’ some aspects of reality. The behaviour associated with it is placed in the realm of unquestioned routine, habit and tradition (Kabeer 2000:43). Bourdieu also refers to tradition as ‘doxa’: that which is accepted as a natural and self-evident part of the social order and thus goes without saying and is not open to questioning or contestation, or cannot be questioned as the vocabulary is not available (Agarwal 1994; Kabeer 2000:46). Doxa includes practices and traditions that can favour some groups over others, as is the case in certain
gendered practices and rules. The interests of the dominated group may be to open up some issues for contestation, while the domineering group will want to maintain the space for doxa. Change occurs when the dominated group obtains a stronger bargaining position (Agarwal 1994). Or as Kabeer (1999:441) states:

… the passage from ‘doxa’ to a more critical consciousness takes place when competing ways of ‘being and doing’ become available as material and cultural possibilities, so that ‘common sense’ propositions of culture, that is habitus, begin to lose their naturalized character.

The question that then arises is: has moving to a new country catalysed passages from doxa to new states of consciousness and new ways of being and doing?

The community domain

A reorientation of habitus takes place in the course of any person’s migration. This is inevitable, since habitus involves the negotiation and competent selection of actions in respect to immediate, local systems of structured relationships (Vertovec 2003:17). In other words, moving to another place often entails arriving in a society that, to some extent, has different social norms and values, a new language, and a new working and social environment to which migrants need to adapt. New ways of doing and being are required, learned and integrated into their daily life; their habitus changes. Guarnizo (1997:311) speaks of the ‘transnational habitus’:

… a particular set of dualistic dispositions that inclines migrants to act and react to specific situations in a manner that can be, but is not always calculated and that is not simply a question of conscious acceptance of specific behavioural or sociocultural rules (…). The transnational habitus incorporates the social position of the migrant and the context in which transmigration occurs.

While not bringing about substantial societal transformations by themselves, patterns of cross-border exchange and relationship among migrants may contribute significantly to broadening, deepening or intensifying conjoined processes of transformation that are already ongoing (Vertovec 2004:972).

While an increasing number of scholars of transnationalism have adopted a gendered perspective, gender has largely remained a blind spot in theorizing transnationalism (Morokvasic 2003:120; Phizacklea 2003). Moving from one place to another means moving between different gendered spaces. Daily life in the new place is often governed to some extent by gendered rules, norms and value systems that differ from those practised in the country of origin.

The literature on gender and migration shows that women and men experience their encounters with the receiving country differently (Itzigsohn & Giorguli-Sauce-do 2005:896). On the one hand, migrants are contextualized in a new living and working environment to which they need to adjust, while on the other hand they are part of a diaspora community that has strong ties with and is loyal to the norms and
values of the homeland. Social surveillance from within the own community is common. In the process of adjusting to the new environment, migrant women have to continuously renegotiate their gendered position versus the host society, their own migrant community and the family back home (Espín 1999; Willis & Yeoh 2000).

Moreover, as several studies have found, migrant men are more likely than their female counterparts to want to return to their home countries. Many women feel that their sociocultural status and their room to manoeuvre have increased since arriving in bidesh (a foreign country), while men are more likely to perceive the reverse to be the case (Mahler & Pessar 2001, 2006). Nevertheless, while women’s social realities – including their gendered positions and relations – frequently change, this is not necessarily ‘liberating’ or ‘constraining’ but can mean different things in different domains and contexts, and may differ among women and over time (cf. Anthias 2000; Parreñas 2001). Whether and if so how gender roles and relations across transnational spaces are reaffirmed, reconstructed or both, and how this relates to migrants’ initial migration goals and the possible attainment of these, need to be looked into.

The domestic domain

As far as the domestic domain – the new ‘home’ in the host society – is concerned, ‘new’ and ‘old’ ways of ‘being and doing’ (Kabeer 2000) are reflected in new living arrangements, namely the households formed by either male or female colleagues. Although the migrants in these households come from the same country and are of the same gender, their backgrounds often differ as regards educational level, marital status, social class, whether they come from a town or the countryside. While the new living arrangements give rise to new relations and household dynamics, relations with the household in Bangladesh continue to play an important role in migrants’ everyday lives.

In short, migrants are often socioculturally dually embedded: they have a bifocal orientation. What this means exactly for individual migrants in their daily lives needs to be explored. How people experience their stay abroad and how they value what comes of it are determined by the various factors and conditions experienced in the different domains and the way these relate to their initial goals and expectations.

2.5 The post-migration stage

Little research has been conducted on return migration. This is perhaps not all that surprising, since most migration studies focus on settlement migration and issues related to integration. As for the impact on those who were left behind, studies generally focus on the economic impact of remittances (Cohen 2005). Yet, as far as studies on temporary migration are concerned, the impact of the migration experience on migrants’ lives once they have returned home is very sparse (Asis 2001; Sukamdi 2001), and is primarily concerned with the allocation of remittances and sa-
vings. It is often argued that many returned labour migrants aspire to migrate again and engage in circular migration.

Those ‘women and migration’ studies in Asia that have looked into the post-migration stage generally depart from the notion of women’s ‘empowerment’ and base their analysis predominantly on survey data (INSTRAW 2000; Chantavanich et al. 2001). For this study, I decided for several reasons not to employ the concept of empowerment. First, while it is acknowledged that some interesting work has drawn on empowerment, the notion is often ambiguously applied. It is not adequately theorized and has become a popular catch phrase used and misused by many in the academic and the NGO world. Second, it has been pointed out by proponents that identification of what constitutes empowerment – that is, defining what is regarded as empowering and what is regarded as disempowering – is a matter of personal judgement and thus can differ among people. Yet, all too often, empowerment is externally induced and defined (Batliwala 1993; Carr et al. 1996:188). Taking any preset definitions of empowerment as a departure point entails the danger that the perceptions and lived realities of the people whose empowerment is the focus of attention will be marginalized or even omitted.

In this study it is recognized migration is a personal experience, and that therefore migration has a different impact on the life of each individual migrant (Morokvasic 1983:27). When analysing the actual consequences of people’s migration experiences, these need to be situated within the framework of people’s personal context, aims and perceptions. While these aims may have shifted over the course of time, the paramountcy of understanding the context and dynamics that made individuals migrate in the first place are crucial in understanding the consequences.

While many aspects may have influenced migrants’ migration decisions, these are often embedded in economic gain, namely remittances and savings and goods that are brought back. An important question thus relates to what the money is spent on and how and by whom decisions were made. To understand the evolvement of this and other goals, the intersections of the dynamics in the various domains in the home context need to be looked into. Likewise, what migrants may strive for economically is often socioculturally contextualized. The sociocultural context and gender norms in Bangladesh are further discussed in Chapter 3. For our purposes here, it is helpful to note that within the sociocultural context of Bangladesh, family and male guardianship remain women’s greatest source of economic and social security. Therefore, women’s interests and attempts to enlarge their social space are frequently embedded in attempts that are geared towards equalizing terms of interdependence within the family rather than towards establishing autonomy (Kabeer 1998:66). Although the notion ‘autonomy’ as used by some is not suitable, the underlying desire – namely to increase one’s scope of self-determination – is pivotal. While structurally conditioned, many migrant women strive to enlarge their scope to make their own life choices (Kabeer 1999). Thus, the question is how far are migration aims and goals linked to the actual and perceived expansion of decision-making ability in the post-migration phase, if at all?
Within the context of individual decisions and goals, four broad areas of significance can be discerned when looking at the post-migration phase. Drawing on Lim (1995:29), these can be identified as:

— Economic factors, for example possession of and increases in control over resources (knowledge, time, money, material goods, etc.).
— Political factors, for example the ability or power to make decisions of various sorts (such as decisions to migrate), the control and disbursement of income from work, etc.
— Social factors, for example prestige, respect or esteem accorded to women due to their migration experiences, attributed material wealth, actions and behaviour.
— Physical factors, such as health and control over the own body.

Since the effects of migration may unfold over an extended period of time, longitudinal studies are needed to understand the long-term consequences of migration on returned migrants and the lives of their families (cf. Mahler & Pessar 2006:32; Sinke 2006:98).

2.6 Conclusion

The discussion in this chapter reveals the complexity of the issues related to migration and the role of the situational context of individual migrants. Migration theory is largely formulated and developed on the basis of studies of male migrants and South to North settlement migration. Temporary and female migration – which separately and combined represent a large proportion of contemporary global migration – cannot be adequately explained using only the theoretical tools developed in mainstream migration theory.

In this chapter, I presented a gendered analytical framework that can be used to understand temporary labour migration. A multilevel approach was utilized given the spatial and temporal character of the migration process. The empirical situation of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia is explored in the following chapters.
CHAPTER 3: THE SENDING AND THE RECEIVING COUNTRY: BANGLADESH AND MALAYSIA

This chapter focuses on the socio-economic context of Bangladesh and Malaysia and on the structural aspects that have stirred migration flows between the two countries.

Map 3.1: South-South East Asia

Source: Esri-data 2006

3.1 Bangladesh: Economic and demographic context

With a population of 142 million and a population density of 1042 people per square kilometre, Bangladesh has one of the highest population densities in the world. It is the world’s third largest Islamic country (Siddiqui 2003:2; World Bank 2006a). When British rule in South Asia ended in 1947, West Bengal and Pakistan became a single Muslim state, even though they were geographically separated by India and were thousands of miles apart. A short but bloody liberation war brought an end to this arrangement, and in 1971 Bangladesh became an independent state. The new state struggled with the political and economic effects of the war. The Pakistan army had killed hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshis (and perhaps millions; the figures
are unreliable), including many intellectuals and potential leaders. The economy was disrupted and political independence was accompanied by growing authoritarianism. Starting in the 1970s, Bangladesh had been gradually transformed into a more monetized economy based on formal labour relations (Kabeer 2000:59). Prices rose as a result of the international oil crisis; several natural disasters and large-scale crop failures added to the malaise, which culminated in the 1974-75 famine. Poverty and landlessness increased rapidly, inducing migration to urban areas, particularly to Dhaka.

Map 3.2: Bangladesh

1. Just three years after independence, the civilian regime that had led the war of independence turned the country’s multiparty parliamentary democracy into a one-party presidential system. In 1975 the military took control of the state. After a popular uprising, democracy was re-established in 1991. Since then, the political power has changed three times between the two leading parties – the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and the Awami League (Siddiqui 2003:2). Struggles over political power between these parties are not uncommonly disruptive, as they regularly culminate in general strikes (hartals) that completely paralyse public life for a day or longer and form a major obstacle to public order and peace as well as economic progress.
In the late 1970s, two thirds of the population lived below the poverty line, and according to the latest estimates, 50% still live below the poverty line (World Bank 2006a). Bangladesh has high rates of malnutrition and maternal mortality, and is one of the world’s poorest countries. Economic hardship is generally highest among women in terms of good health and nutrition, and education and income (Siddiqui 2003:2; UNDP 2003). The average life expectancy at birth is 63 years, with men living several months longer than women. In 2002, the adult literacy rate was 31% for women and 49% for men (World Bank 2006a). The literacy rate among those aged between 15 and 24 rose from 42% in 1990 to 49% in 2001, and school enrolment for boys and girls is now virtually equal at both the primary and the secondary level. In 2006, GDP per capita was USD 2121 (IMF 2006). GDP rates have risen since the mid 1980s, largely as a result of the expanding industrial sector and a major contribution from the garments industry (see table 3.1). Between 1995 and 2005, GDP increased each year by an average of 5.3% (World Bank 2006a).

Table 3.1: Structure of the Bangladeshi economy (% of GDP)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1985</th>
<th>1995</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>27.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td>45.8</td>
<td>49.1</td>
<td>52.4</td>
<td>52.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: World Bank 2006a: ‘Bangladesh at a glance’

The garment industry in Bangladesh occupies a prominent position within the country’s industrial structure. In 1982, World Bank stipulations and incentives led the government to introduce its New Industrial Policy. Within a few years, the garments sector was employing 250,000 people; by 2001 this figure had quadrupled. The majority of garment workers are women. It is the largest manufacturing sector and provides jobs for some 50% of the total industrial workforce. The sector contributes 9.5% to the country’s GDP and accounts for almost 77% of total exports, making it the country’s leading foreign exchange earner (World Bank 2003c; World Bank 2006a). The dependence on this sector, however, makes the country vulnerable to fluctuations in the international economic arena. This dependence became particularly clear in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in the USA: more than 300,000 garment workers – approximately a third of the total number employed in the sector – lost their jobs in the few months following the attacks (BBC 7-11-2001).

Although the industrial and service sectors in Bangladesh are expanding, it is estimated that two thirds of the labour force is still directly or indirectly engaged in agriculture. Scarcity of land, unemployment and underemployment are major problems. About one third of the total working age population of Bangladesh is believed to be either unemployed or underemployed; educated people make up a disproportionately large percentage of the unemployed (Mahmood 1996; Siddiqui 2003:2). An estimated 5% of the labour force is employed outside the country. While it has been argued that migration cannot possibly have a significant impact
on the national level of labour statistics – given an 80-million strong labour force compared to several hundred thousand migrating each year (Skeldon 2003) – others argue that migration and the continuous inflow of remittances play a major role in keeping the unemployment rate stable (Afsar et al. 2000; IOM 2002). Many Bangladeshis migrate, but many more are trying to do so in order to escape unemployment (cf. de Bruyn & Kuddus 2005).

Migrants’ remittances are a major source of revenues to the country. While the garment industry is officially the highest foreign exchange earner in Bangladesh, Siddiqui (2003:3) argues that if these figures were adjusted for the import of raw material, the net earnings of migrant workers’ remittances would be higher than that of the garment industry. Remittances make up 30% of all foreign exchange earnings and contribute greatly to balancing the trade bill by covering approximately two thirds of the trade deficit. Since the mid 1990s, the total amount of remittances has been larger than the total amount of foreign aid received (Afsar et al. 2000:31; Murshid et al. 2000:11).

Between 2000 and 2002, about USD 2 billion was remitted annually via official channels; in 2003, this figure rose to USD 3 billion. Apart from these formal remittances, at least an equally large sum is sent via unofficial sources (Siddiqui 2003; de Bruyn & Kuddus 2005). Although unofficial remittances do not contribute to a country’s foreign exchange earnings, they are nevertheless of great economic importance to the receiving families and fuel the country’s economy.

3.2 Migration: scope and direction of flows

As in most countries, the rural to urban migration flow in Bangladesh is larger than the international migration outflow. Internal migration and international migration are often interrelated, as many people who migrate internationally have already moved within the country (de Bruyn & Kuddus 2005:10). International migration is very topical in many villages or neighbourhoods in Bangladesh. Poverty is widespread, land has increasingly ended up in the hands of fewer people and unemployment figures are high. Together with the success stories of those who have returned from working abroad, many people dream of going to bidesh. As Gardner (1993:1) expressively put it:

Peoples’ desires centre on the distant localities of foreign countries, and foreign power (...) those who have never left the homeland long for the self-imposed exile of the diaspora, for despite the pulls of the homeland, it is only overseas that economic power and the means to material transformation are supposed to exist.

The dream of going to bidesh reflects people’s insecurity of life in Bangladesh and the continual economic struggle that many face. Although not everyone succeeds abroad, many households risk their livelihood by selling land or indebting themselves by attempting to send a household member abroad. In many villages, a large percentage of the male population has migrated.
Over the past decade, documented emigration grew by about 10% annually. Each year in the period 1991-2002, an average of 226,000 Bangladeshis left the country for employment elsewhere. Over the past 30 years, more than 3.8 million Bangladeshis officially left for overseas employment opportunities. Some migrants may have been counted more than once, as some are likely to have obtained subsequent short-term labour contracts. Likewise, large numbers of migrants are believed to have left undocumented and are hence unaccounted for. In general, reliable data on emigration from Bangladesh is hard to find (de Bruyn & Kuddus 2005:8).

The region’s colonial past has influenced its migration flows. Many Bangladeshis migrated to the UK, and later to the USA; these flows came to an abrupt halt following the 1973 oil crisis (Ahmed 2000; Siddiqui 2003). In combination with increasingly stringent migration regulations worldwide, migration flows from Bangladesh have changed drastically since the early 1970s. Contemporary emigration is characterized by two distinct migration flows: a small flow to industrialized countries and a large flow to the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Although many potential migrants envision migrating to industrialized countries in the West, emigration from Bangladesh to these countries is largely limited to students, professionals and those who immigrate to be reunited with their families. There are no official data on the number of documented or undocumented Bangladeshi migrants living in industrialized countries. According to an educated guess by government officials and migration experts, there are close to 1.2 million Bangladeshis living in industrialized countries (Siddiqui 2003). It is estimated that half a million Bangladeshis live in the UK and another half million in the USA. About 70,000 live in Italy. Other countries mentioned are Canada, Japan, Australia and Greece, each of which hosts more than 10,000 migrants (de Bruyn & Kuddus 2005).

The overwhelming majority of migrants who leave Bangladesh move to either the Middle East or Southeast Asia (see table 3.2). These flows consist almost exclusively of short-term labour migrants. Although some migrants are recruited for skilled jobs (technicians, masons, etc.), the majority of Bangladeshi contract workers work in semi-skilled or unskilled professions in the construction, manufacturing or service sectors (Siddiqui 2003:16).

The demand for work visas for Middle Eastern destinations remains high, even though wages have decreased over the years. The high demand has had a negative effect on the fees demanded by recruiters and on the wages paid overseas (Goss and Lindquist, 2000; INSTRAW/OM 2000:18; de Bruyn & Kuddus 2005). Many of those who had to return after their contracts expired, try to migrate again. Although not all succeed, many engage in long-distance circular migration.

Apart from those who migrated documented, many left the country undocumented. Many reports and studies on international migration from Bangladesh leave undocumented migration relatively untouched. Although researching the latter is less straightforward, thorough studies are sorely needed. The major destination of undocumented migration from Bangladesh is neighbouring India. Although there

Migration: scope and direction of flows

49
### Table 3.2: Migration by country of employment (1976-2002)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Saudi Arabia</th>
<th>Kuwait</th>
<th>UAE</th>
<th>Qatar</th>
<th>Iraq</th>
<th>Libya</th>
<th>Bah-rain</th>
<th>Oman</th>
<th>Malaysia</th>
<th>Korea</th>
<th>Singa-pore</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1976-1989</td>
<td>254,215</td>
<td>84,961</td>
<td>105,986</td>
<td>57,765</td>
<td>63,643</td>
<td>311,322</td>
<td>28,062</td>
<td>833,723</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>3851</td>
<td>9345</td>
<td>723,886</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>557,486</td>
<td>5957</td>
<td>8307</td>
<td>7672</td>
<td>2700</td>
<td>471</td>
<td>4563</td>
<td>13,980</td>
<td>1385</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>776</td>
<td>517</td>
<td>103,814</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>75,656</td>
<td>28,547</td>
<td>8583</td>
<td>3772</td>
<td>1124</td>
<td>3480</td>
<td>23,087</td>
<td>1628</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>585</td>
<td>147,131</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>93,132</td>
<td>34,377</td>
<td>12,975</td>
<td>3251</td>
<td>1617</td>
<td>5804</td>
<td>25,825</td>
<td>10,537</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>188,124</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>106,387</td>
<td>26,407</td>
<td>15,810</td>
<td>2441</td>
<td>1800</td>
<td>5396</td>
<td>15,866</td>
<td>67,938</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1739</td>
<td>724</td>
<td>244,508</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>911,385</td>
<td>14,912</td>
<td>15,051</td>
<td>624</td>
<td>1864</td>
<td>4233</td>
<td>6470</td>
<td>47,826</td>
<td>1558</td>
<td>391</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>186,326</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>84,009</td>
<td>17,492</td>
<td>14,686</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>1106</td>
<td>3004</td>
<td>20,949</td>
<td>35,174</td>
<td>3315</td>
<td>3762</td>
<td>3975</td>
<td>187,543</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>72,734</td>
<td>21,042</td>
<td>23,812</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>3759</td>
<td>8691</td>
<td>66,631</td>
<td>2759</td>
<td>5304</td>
<td>4904</td>
<td>211,714</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>106,534</td>
<td>21,126</td>
<td>54,719</td>
<td>1873</td>
<td>1934</td>
<td>5010</td>
<td>5985</td>
<td>*152,844</td>
<td>889</td>
<td>27,401</td>
<td>2762</td>
<td>381,077</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>158,715</td>
<td>25,444</td>
<td>38,796</td>
<td>6806</td>
<td>1254</td>
<td>7014</td>
<td>4779</td>
<td>551</td>
<td>578</td>
<td>21,728</td>
<td>2602</td>
<td>267,667</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>26,286</td>
<td>3324</td>
<td>3912</td>
<td>864</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>666</td>
<td>713</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>563</td>
<td>268,182</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>144,618</td>
<td>594</td>
<td>34,034</td>
<td>1433</td>
<td>1010</td>
<td>4637</td>
<td>5258</td>
<td>17,237</td>
<td>990</td>
<td>11,095</td>
<td>1780</td>
<td>222,686</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>137,248</td>
<td>5341</td>
<td>16,252</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>4371</td>
<td>4561</td>
<td>4921</td>
<td>1561</td>
<td>9615</td>
<td>4422</td>
<td>188,965</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>163,258</td>
<td>8272</td>
<td>25,459</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>1574</td>
<td>5421</td>
<td>3854</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>6856</td>
<td>1127</td>
<td>216,025</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,731,116</td>
<td>316,899</td>
<td>406,845</td>
<td>91,745</td>
<td>66,343</td>
<td>49,236</td>
<td>89,393</td>
<td>227,073</td>
<td>257,739</td>
<td>13,179</td>
<td>103,069</td>
<td>3,387,648</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: In Siddiqui 2003:15, prepared from Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training data)

* A disproportionately large number due to a legislation scheme of undocumented Bangladeshis in Malaysia*
are no official statistics, it is estimated that about 15 million Bangladeshis currently reside in India (van Schendel & Abraham, 2005).\(^2\) Undocumented migration from Bangladesh to other destinations is also believed to be significant, and has increased over the past decades. Several factors underlie this trend: an ever-increasing demand for overseas jobs due to the lack of alternative employment opportunities in Bangladesh; a decrease in the number of overseas work permits; restrictions on female migration; and the lack of control and regulation of unofficial and deceitful recruiters (Siddiqui 2003).

Many migrants who rely on recruiters – many of whom are dubious characters – are unaware of their actual status. The large majority of migrants are men. Before looking at female migration, it is instructive to first focus on women, gender and work in Bangladesh.

3.3 Women, marriage and work in Bangladesh

Although an increasing number of women in Bangladesh are taking paid jobs outside their homes, it is not yet the norm. Women’s roles and appropriate behaviour are closely linked with prevalent gender norms that a woman should remain within the domestic realm (Amin 1997:33).

The concept of purdah – a set of norms and rules that prescribe the standards for female behaviour – is central to the definition of femininity in Bangladesh. Purdah literally means ‘veil’ or ‘curtain’ and refers to the practice of women’s seclusion. Purdah is often associated with Islam, but it seems to derive from organizing principles that existed in Bangladesh and India before the arrival of Islam (Rozario 1998:259). In the strictest sense, it refers to keeping women confined to the home and allowing them to leave the home compound only if they are completely covered, that is, wearing a burqua. Purdah thus has a clear spatial dimension: the movement of women is spatially controlled, as purdah demarcates women’s domestic and hidden domain or place from men’s public and visible domain. Purdah also entails codes of behaviour that are intended to enforce women’s modesty and purity, as well as restrictions on interactions with men from outside the immediate kin group. Since purdah restricts women’s behaviour and movement, it profoundly affects their access to paid employment outside the home and hampers their economic independence (Rozario 1992:88; Gardner 1994:5; Kabeer 2000:35; Amin 1997).\(^3\)

As in many other countries in Asia and other parts of the world, Bangladeshi women derive prestige from being married and having children. An unmarried adult

---

\(^2\) This issue has increasingly been politicized in India and has put a (further) strain on India-Bangladeshi relations; the former demanding that Bangladesh takes back its citizens. Subsequent Bangladeshi governments have consistently denied the presence of any illegal immigrants in India.

\(^3\) Certain class differences can however be discerned. For educated middle- or upper-class women it is often socially accepted and not uncommon to hold jobs outside the home – although families often expect women to stop work after marriage.
woman is regarded as sexually dangerous and a potential source of shame to her family. Remaining unmarried is not a desirable option for most women, as it generally implies economic uncertainty, low prestige and vulnerability to various forms of abuse (Kabeer 2000:187).

Among Muslims in Bangladesh and elsewhere, it is traditional for the groom’s family to pay the bride’s family a bride price at the time of marriage. Since the 1970s, however, a radical shift has taken place in the organization of the institution of marriage in Bangladesh: instead of paying a bride price to the bride’s relatives, the practice of demanding dowry (money and goods) from her parents has become increasingly common. This shift has far-reaching consequences for gender relations, as it has led to an ‘economic devaluation’ of women (as wives) and negatively affected their social position (Kabeer 2000:60). There are various explanations as to why this change took place. According to the elderly in many villages, the shift to the dowry system and the increase in dowry payments were due to a rather sudden surplus of eligible girls to be wedded. Although this explanation is rejected by many social scientists, according to Amin and Cain (1997) a marriage ‘squeeze’ was the main reason for the shift.\(^4\) While these authors did not take socio-economic aspects into account, such aspects may well have played a role.

It has been asserted by some that the shift from bride price to dowry was influenced by the confluence of local and global processes. Initially, only wealthy urban Muslims adopted the Hindu tradition of paying dowries to show off their wealth and to ensure that their daughters would have a good life after marriage. In the course of time, this custom was adopted by the lower classes. The dowry was also used as a vehicle for upward social mobility for daughters – marrying a daughter into a ‘better’ family or into a higher class or caste position (Gardner 1994; Rozario 1992; Kabeer 2000). During those years, Bangladesh had been progressively incorporated into the global cash economy, which had a significantly different impact on men than on women. Men increasingly took on waged employment, which resulted in a rise in the value of their labour as they started to earn cash. At the same time, women’s traditional economic roles, which are linked to processing agricultural yields, were increasingly eroded as a result of the growth of landlessness and the increasing importance of the cash economy. The cash economy held few structural job opportunities for women, as their traditional place continued to be within the home compound. While the ‘value’ of men increased, that of women eroded further (Kabeer 2000:60). In combination with the social ‘must’ of marriage for women and

\(^4\) Amin and Cain (1997:304) argue that the initial excesses were large for two reasons; the relatively small size of birth cohorts of the 1940s, most likely owing to the Bengal famine of 1943, combined with a relatively large birth cohort of the following decade. While the overall sex ratios did not show an excess of girls, the sex ratios for age ranges appropriate for marriage show a considerable excess of marriageable girls, which is explained by declining mortality, which created younger cohorts that were larger that older cohorts, combined with the norm that men marry younger women. The time that the marriage squeeze occurred is consistent with the timing of the practice of dowry – about 20 years after mortality first began to decline. In the following decades the ratio became more even and the squeeze is easing.
the marriage squeeze, dowries were increasingly demanded at inflated rates. The trend towards ever larger dowry demands seemed to also reflect the increasing importance of global images of consumer cultures and the desire to accumulate material wealth (i.e. consumer goods), as also witnessed in (Hindu) India. As a result of these factors, dowry became an important cause of marital instability and violence. Women are increasingly abandoned or divorced by their husbands, who because of financial distress demand higher and additional dowry payments. For poor men and their families, dowries have become a source of income (Ahmed & Naher 1987; Kabeer 2000:60). Polygamy is reported to be on the increase, and although there are some restrictions, it is not forbidden by law (Afroz, 2007).

Sociocultural and economic practices are produced by the intersection of local and global processes (Massey 1994; McDowell 1999:4). In this context, global processes – which led to the monetization of the economy and increased consumerism – interlocked with traditional, local notions of femininity and masculinity, and resulted in a detrimental effect on the position of women as wives. Within less than a generation, the position of a woman became closely linked to her potential economic ‘gain’ for a prospective husband and his family; a daughter now had the potential to be a financial burden to her family (Rozario 1992: Kabeer 2000).

A consequence of the 1974-5 famine and the increasing economic hardship was that poor women, whether married or single, had little option but to transgress gender rules. In order to survive they increasingly took up employment. Although opportunities were limited, women started to work as day labourers and maids (Khan 1992; Rozario 1998:161; Kabeer 2000:60). In the 1980s, when the garment industry was established and proceeded to grow rapidly, women started to enter the public sphere of the labour market on a larger scale. The factories were located in and around Dhaka (the capital) and Chittagong, and many women from the surrounding rural areas migrated to these cities (Khundker 2001). By the turn of the century, more than one million women were working in this industry. This development mirrored a dramatic change that permeated public life as a whole. As Kabeer (2000: vii) observed:

[Nowadays] thousands of young women [are] moving briskly around on the streets of Dhaka. In a city, a country, where women had been conspicuous by their absence in the public domain this was not merely a new phenomenon but a remarkable one.

With the growing participation of women in urban public life, urban spatial organization changed, as did the gendered code of conduct. For many women the garment industry offered a way out of extreme poverty, the dowry-marriage deadlock and dependence – even if only temporarily.

Studies on women, work and gender have at times come to rather opposing conclusions concerning the alleged changes in the position of women and gender in Bangladesh (cf. Khan 1992; Feldman 1992; Zaman 1995; Amin 1997). These differences seem to be due to the different localities in which these studies were conducted (i.e. in and around Dhaka versus the deep countryside). Gender norms fluc-
tuate geographically and are influenced by broader political and economic forces, which impact places differently (cf. Lawson 1998). Although micro-credit schemes and small-scale projects are found to have contributed in rural areas, job opportunities remained far fewer in the countryside, particularly in the areas furthest away from Dhaka.

Working conditions in the garment industry in Bangladesh are among the worst in the world, and the wages are among the lowest. Contracts, medical leave and health facilities are generally not provided. Overtime is often both compulsory and excessive; workdays of 12-14 hours are the rule rather than the exception. Trade unions are often prohibited. While the minimum wage itself is very low and households find it hard to live on, Afsar (2001) found that 40% of the women working in the garment industry were earning less than the minimum wage. Not surprisingly, many garment workers suffer from health problems and sleep deficiency (Paul-Majunder & Zohir 1995; Paul-Majunder, 2000; Kibria 2001). Women nevertheless continue to enter the sector in large numbers, as it provides opportunities that are otherwise absent.

The increasing presence of women in the public space led to widespread criticism. Garment workers in Bangladesh are highly stigmatized both in the media and within the wider public discourse. Their jobs are associated with low status and low levels of morality. Historically, this type of defamatory reaction is rather common worldwide. When women start to move out of their domestic gendered places to become employed outside the home, they are often perceived to be challenging existing power relations and the hegemonic gender discourse (Massey 1994). Women who take factory jobs are frequently perceived as having ‘low morals’. Parents are eager for their daughters to marry, in order to safeguard the family’s prestige. Within the Bangladeshi context, Rozario (1992:150) remarked that ‘Drastic changes in Bangladesh’s economy/structure have not been reflected in its ideology/superstructure’. Young brides should be ‘pure’ and have lived a secluded life, but also be educated and rich. According to Rozario (1992:150): ‘Bengalis want the fruits of modernity (radios, televisions, motorcycles, etc.) but are not willing to pay the price (increasing incorporation of women in the workforce threatening their purity).’

Ironically, it was precisely this dilemma that enhanced the establishment of an alternative gender discourse in which young women increasingly go to work. The need to earn a dowry often entails the legitimizing rationale and offers a way for unmarried women to obtain permission to pursue their working aspirations, whether these are born out of sheer need for household survival or are also aimed at increasing their room to manoeuvre, that is, their personal freedom to make their own decisions. In this context, Cornell’s (1995 in Mc Dowell 1999:18) differentiation between a ‘domineering gender regime’ and a set of oppositional gender regimes is instructive. The latter challenges the assumptions about gender and sexuality of the dominant discourse, which can lead to change. Even though women’s entry into the public domain remains contested, and women regularly experience the consequences of negative public opinion and of actions on the part of those factions of society that want to preserve the status quo, women are nonetheless going to work in increasing numbers. Kabeer’s (2000) study on the garment industry shows how, despite stig-
matization, female garment workers started to alter the image of working women by entering the industry on such a large scale. They hence paved the way for and inspired other women who previously might have hesitated to take these jobs due to status and class issues. Over the years, more women with less immediate economic needs also started to enter the industry, in order to gain more independence or to improve their economic situation. Many women still experience social stigmatization; both verbal and physical abuse are common. Nevertheless, women have renegotiated meanings of appropriate gender norms and continue to find options for employment.

It is in light of these developments – changes in the institution of marriage, the need for jobs, the development of the garment industry and the concomitant renegotiations / formulations concerning women’s ‘appropriate’ behaviour – that women’s increased interest in overseas migration should be understood. During a time in which more and more Bangladeshi men were migrating internationally and were seen or believed to come home with money, consumer goods and prestige, increasing numbers of women wanted to do the same. When recruiters started to look for women for overseas factories, not uncommonly at the request of their overseas business partners, women started to leave. For many, working in well-paid modern factories in foreign countries seemed an honourable and lucrative alternative to the poorly paid jobs in the garment industry in the major cities of Bangladesh.

3.4 Female migration

In many countries, data on migration are only minimally disaggregated by gender. Up until 1991, emigration figures were not gender-specific in Bangladesh. De Bruyn and Kuddus (2005:18) used data from the governmental Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training to calculate that between 1991 and 2003 only 17,784 women officially migrated. Accounting for less than 1% of all migrants from Bangladesh, official female migration from Bangladesh is low, especially when compared to other Asian sending countries, such as the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Indonesia where female migrants make up 60-80% of the total number of migrants leaving these countries. Not surprisingly, some scholars who focus on Asian female migration suggest that female migration from Bangladesh is ‘negligible’ or ‘not in their culture’ (Shah 1996, cited in Blanchet 2002). Oishi (2002:12; 2005) goes as far as to argue that since in Bangladesh it is mostly the men who do the daily grocery shopping, they are the ones who are in charge of expenditures. Women know little about the household finances and thus ‘are less motivated to take the financial responsibility by going abroad’. In my view, this postulation is not only somewhat presumptuous but also incorrect. Although not many Bangladeshi women have migrated offi-

5. The recruiters – middlemen who generally were from the villages or areas in which they operated – had usually contacted the guardians of daughters’ they considered eligible to migrate. This strategy had also been used when the garment industry in Bangladesh took off (cf. Kabeer 2000).
cially, significant numbers of women have migrated undocumented. A study by Blanchet, Razzaque & Biswas (2005) concluded that more than 437,000 Bangladeshi women are working abroad. In short, Bangladeshi women have not only migrated on a large scale within the country, but many have migrated internationally (cf. Rahim 1997; IOM 2000; INSTRAW 2000; Asar et al. 2000; Blanchet 2002; Siddiqui 2003; de Bruyn & Kuddus 2005). Meanwhile, many more are trying to do likewise.

The main reasons for the low percentage of women in documented migration statistics are the intermittent restrictions on female migration imposed by the Bangladeshi government since the beginning of the 1980s. In 1981, following the advice of a religious leader, a complete ban on the migration of unskilled and semi-skilled women was imposed in order to ‘protect women’s dignity’. In 1988 the ban was replaced by restrictions: the migration of unskilled and semi-skilled women became dependent on receiving ‘special permission’. In the early to mid 1990s, a substantial number of women migrated as factory workers, domestic helpers or nurses.6 In 1997, a complete ban on individual unskilled and semi-skilled female migration was reimposed to protect women as a response to cases of abuse of domestic workers in the Middle East. It was argued that working as an industrial or a domestic worker, or even as a nurse, would expose women to harm and dishonour (INSTRAW/IOM 2000:30). Although the migration of professional and skilled women is now permitted, the ban is still in place for low-rank professions. Unskilled women are allowed to migrate only if they are accompanied by male guardians (Siddiqui 2003:7). However, it has been reported that the government has recently been exploring ways to relax or even lift these restrictions (de Bruyn & Kuddus 2005:16).

The imposition of these policies is closely related to the general societal taboo on women’s work. As with garment workers, women who migrate are frequently stigmatized as being immoral and loose. However, neither stigmatization nor restrictive policies has eliminated women’s need or desire to migrate; instead, they have made the female migrants ‘invisible’. Large numbers of women are trying to find the means, support and ways to migrate internationally and individually. Being dependent on ‘illegal’ circuits, they frequently end up in situations in which exploitation is prevalent. Sadly, and ironically, the very policies that were supposed to protect women have pushed them into the undocumented sphere, making them even more vulnerable to abuse (cf. IOM 2000; Blanchet 2002; Siddiqui 2003). Although many migrant women from Bangladesh want jobs in factories as opposed to domestic work, which is associated with greater vulnerability, the vast majority are employed as domestic workers.

---

6. It should be noted that also in those days not all female migrants who held official documents in the country of arrival had left Bangladesh ‘legally’. Obtaining a visa can be a cumbersome and time-consuming process. Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training criteria needed to be met: women migrant workers required permission from a guardian (husband, father, brother) and the employer had to guarantee their safety and social security. At times it was easier to circumvent bureaucracy (Rahim 1997:38; IOM/INSTRAW 2000:9; Siddiqui 2003:7).
3.5 The recruitment process: government policies, recruiters and procedures

Until quite recently, the Bangladeshi government was reluctant to actively acknowledge the tremendous contribution that migrants’ remittances make to the national economy. The country lacked a coherent migration policy. The allocation for the facilitation and regulation of migration was a modest 0.1% of the national revenue budget. Policy statements that encouraged labour migration in order to ease unemployment and earn foreign exchange were largely just that: statements (Malik & Abrar 2000:6; Rahim 1997; Achacoso 2000:52; Afsar et al. 2000; Murshid et al. 2000; Siddiqui 2003).

Between 1976 and 2002, the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (which is part of the Ministry of Labour and Employment) was in charge of the facilitation of labour migration. Although the Emigration Ordinance was formulated in 1982, it mainly addressed procedural aspects; specific rules and regulations were not developed for another 20 years (INSTRAW/IOM 2000:29). In the meantime, the government engaged in several informal agreements with receiving countries. These agreements were generally on an ad hoc basis and dealt with the number of workers to be recruited and the handling of crises. Bilateral agreements were conspicuously absent, and the terms and conditions of work or welfare for migrants were not addressed. So far, the legal process has largely been ineffective in protecting the rights of migrant workers who are seeking legal recourse (Rahim 1997:29; Malik & Abrar 2000:75; Achacoso 2000).

In December 2001, a new ministry – the Ministry of Expatriates’ Welfare and Overseas Employment – was formed in response to the widespread concerns. Rules and regulations were formulated in order to promote, monitor and regulate migration as laid down in the 1982 Emigration Ordinance. The efforts of the new ministry seemed promising. It has been argued, however, that the department is severely under-resourced financially, which makes managing the migration sector difficult (Siddiqui 2003). A salient detail, as rumoured in Dhaka, is that within the hierarchy of his political party, the minister was subordinate to the director of the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA). Hence, some expected that there would be few real measures to curb illegal practices, overcharging and mistreatment by recruitment agencies. When in late 2006 Malaysia resumed recruit-

7. Bangladeshis who have been mistreated can theoretically file a complaint with the Labour Court in Bangladesh. However, up to the year 2000, only about 50 cases had been filled. Migrants who had been ill-treated generally do not bother to file a case; procedures can take years and even if they end in conviction do not guarantee reimbursement, as the outcomes of several cases have shown. The Bangladeshi legal process has largely been ineffective in protecting the rights of migrant workers who are seeking justice (Malik & Abrar 2000 58,75; Achacoso 2000). In the receiving countries, labour attachés at Bangladesh missions are in charge of the protection of migrant workers abroad. With on average one or two officials at each mission they are however severely understaffed. Moreover, there have been a few reported cases in which labour attachés became involved in the recruitment process by forging passports and charging exorbitant high fees for them.
ment from Bangladesh on the condition that migrants would not be overcharged by recruiters, immigration was halted within weeks. According to Malaysian officials, Bangladeshi recruiters heavily overcharge migrants (personal communications, 2007). It is publicly believed in Bangladesh that high-ranking politicians who are closely connected to BAIRA are largely responsible for the high fees (personal communications with various key persons).

Contract labour migration is highly institutionalized (cf. Goss & Lindquist 1995, 2000; Kofman et al. 2000; Phizacklea 2003). Although visas for certain Middle Eastern countries could be obtained relatively easily via friends or relatives, documented migration to Malaysia and Singapore took place almost exclusively within semi-institutionalized networks. Goss and Lindquist (1995:330) rightly highlight in their study on the Philippines that when networks expand, they may actually become more selective and competitive rather than more egalitarian and accessible to an ever-growing group of people. In circumstances such as the one at hand in Bangladesh, where the demand for overseas work permits and visas is large and the supply is limited, migration becomes more institutionalized.

Many migrants hence rely on semi-institutionalized agents – dalals (middlemen or agencies) – to obtain their papers. Other intermediaries are neighbours, relatives or ‘friends’. These individuals, however, do not necessarily operate as benevolently as is sometimes assumed. Although immediate family members may help altruistically, they generally charge for their services. In a study on migration to Kuwait, one of the three main destinations for Bangladeshi migrants, Shah (1996) found that of the various migrant communities, Bangladeshis had paid the highest fees for their migration. This was due not to larger actual costs, but to the greater involvement of manpower agents and intermediaries, and the extra fees charged. The widespread trading in visas for profit, regardless of the jobs available, has been detrimental in that many pay a lot of money for a visa but do not succeed in migrating. Blanchet (2002:188) estimated that about 40% fail in their attempt to migrate to the Middle East.

As some recruiting entrepreneurs became very wealthy, many others, including ex-migrants, tried their luck as well. Consequently, the recruitment business has mushroomed over the past decades. By 2002, BAIRA had registered 700 agencies; however, according to the agents, stiff competition meant that only about a third of the agencies were thriving. Most agencies are medium or small scale, and they often work with a chain of middlemen who are based in villages where they are known and trusted. The business is clearly an opportunistic one. Agencies are not professionally organized. They have hardly any formal or structured relationships with employers in migrant receiving countries and lack information on the dynamics of overseas employment markets. Most recruiters rely heavily on chance encounters

8. Malik and Abrar (2000:64) found in a study amongst Bangladeshi migrants who had left for various destinations, that more than half (56%) had obtained their migration papers through institutional networks – recruitment agencies, travel agencies or dalals (middlemen) – while a little more than one third (38%) had obtained their visas directly with the help of relatives or friends abroad.
and on information acquired through the grapevine and via their networks. They also rely on information from workers who have been sent before and on informants in Dhaka’s hotels, who notify them as soon as a foreign employer has been signalled (Malik & Abrar 2000:4).

Although they operate rather arbitrarily, both recruiters and returnees greatly influence the geography of migration, that is, the areas the migrants come from and those to which they migrate. Certain districts or villages tend to have higher concentrations of migration to certain areas (Malik & Abrar 2000:63; Siddiqui 2003:3). The choice of destination is also influenced by the amount of money would-be migrants can pay for the recruitment fee: while many can somehow scrape together the money to buy a work permit for Malaysia, for example, most cannot afford to migrate to Korea or Japan – let alone the USA, Canada or the UK – as recruitment fees are much higher and often entail smuggling and travelling without valid papers.

3.6 Destinations: the Middle East and Malaysia

Over the past decades, the largest migration flow from Bangladesh has been to the Middle East (see table 3.1). In the 1960s, some of the Bangladeshis who had gone to Saudi Arabia to fulfil haj (pilgrimage) settled there and engaged in business. The wealth they brought back during their visits to their native villages stimulated others to try their luck. These early migrations to the Middle East by Bangladeshis coincided with the need for foreign labour in these oil-rich burgeoning economies. This was the beginning of what was to become a massive migration flow (Abrar & Malik 2000:34).

Migration to the Middle East came to an abrupt though temporary halt with the outbreak of the Gulf War in 1990. Of the 450,000 Asian migrants who were forced to return home due to the war, at least 72,000 were Bangladeshis (Castles & Miller 2003:159; INSTRAW/IOM 2000:8). Consequently, many aspiring migrants and recruiters started to look for alternative destinations. It was at about this time that migration to Malaysia increased in importance. By the mid 1990s, it had become the single largest country of destination for short-term migration outside the Middle East.9

As was the case in the Middle East, individual pioneers who had settled in Malaysia provided contacts between the receiving and the sending countries. Some of the first Bangladeshi migrant workers and businessmen who had come to Malaysia in the 1980s later became large-scale recruiters. The first group of 500 workers arrived in 1986 to work on plantations. By the early 1990s, Bangladeshi migrants had gained the reputation of being ‘hard working’ and ‘compliant’ and had thus become

9. Bangladeshi workers have also been venturing out to other Asian countries, such as Singapore and Korea (see table 3.1). These countries are very popular because the wages are higher – but so are the recruitment fees: migrating to Singapore used to cost approximately 200,000 takas, about double the fee for going to Malaysia.
increasingly popular with Malaysian employers. In 1992, when Malaysia first allowed Bangladeshi migrants to be recruited for the manufacturing sector, the number of migrants from Bangladesh increased significantly (Rudnick 1996:47). According to statistical data from Bangladesh, by 2002 a total of 260,000 Bangladeshis had worked in Malaysia (see table 1). However, there were also many undocumented Bangladeshis working in Malaysia. According to Malaysian statistics, during legalization operations between 1992 and 1994 and in the first half of 1996, approximately 195,000 undocumented Bangladeshis became legalized, that is, received temporary work permits. After the freeze in 1997, 308,000 Bangladeshis were officially working in Malaysia, according to Malaysian statistics (Kassim 1998a:26). Estimates of the total number of undocumented Bangladeshis in Malaysia at the time of these operations ranged from one hundred thousand to several hundred thousand (Migration News 1997). Due to the restrictions on female migrants, between 1991 and August 1996 fewer than 5000 documented Bangladeshi migrant women officially left for Malaysia, which at the time was the single largest destination country for documented female migrants from Bangladesh. These women were recruited exclusively for export-producing factories.

The cultural proximity of the two countries (both are Islamic) enhanced and strengthened both the ties between them and Malaysia’s resolve to recruit workers from Bangladesh. The agreements made were largely informal and on an ad hoc basis until allegations of human rights abuses of Bangladeshis in Malaysian detention camps led to the signing in August 1995 of a bilateral memorandum of understanding. Although the incentive for this formal agreement was the protection of migrants’ rights, it actually focused on recruitment issues and on the prevention of undocumented migration. The memorandum’s tenure was short-lived: recruitment was to cease by January 1997 (Rahim 1997:30), and it did. The short-lived tenure of the memorandum coincided with two events. First, Bangladeshi men had become associated with causing ‘social unrest’ in Malaysia and this perception influenced their further recruitment. Riots had occurred involving conflicts between local and Bangladeshi men. The rivalry was partially driven by jealousy over the popularity of Bangladeshi men among Malaysian women. Second, the Asian financial crisis hit the Malaysian economy and led the government to put a temporary stop to the recruitment of migrant workers. Recruitment from Bangladesh never entirely picked up again for reasons described in the next part of this chapter. By 2006, 64,156 documented Bangladeshis were working in Malaysia (New Straits Times 12-09-2006).

3.7 Malaysia: Economic and Demographic context

Anyone visiting Malaysia at any time from the 1880s onwards would be struck by the enormous presence of foreign workers in the country. At the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th the visitor would encounter Chinese workers in tin mines and Chinese and Indian workers in sugar, coffee and later on rubber plantations. Indian workers could also be seen in the construction of
roads, railways and public utility services. Most Chinese and Indian workers were men. (Garcés-Mascareñas 2006:1)

The region that is now known as Malaysia has been influenced by migration for centuries. At independence in 1957, the large population of foreign descendents had the option to become naturalized Malaysians, and many exercised the option. By 2005, Malaysia’s population reached nearly 25 million, with an annual population growth of 2% (World Bank 2006b). The religion of the ethnic Malays is Islam, as decreed by law. The 2000 national census showed that bumiputras (‘sons of the soil’ – Malays and indigenous people) comprised 65% of the population, Chinese 26% and Indians 8%. Non-Malaysian citizens account for 6% of the population (Bureau of Statistics 2001).

Map 3.3: Malaysia

During colonial times, Malaysia’s economy relied on a few primary products, mainly tin and rubber. After independence the government pushed for further industrial development. Initially, the focus was on import substitution, but in the late 1980s a shift towards an export-oriented approach was made. In recent decades,

10. Between 1895 and 1925, 6 million Chinese were recruited to work in Malaysia. Between 1860 and 1957, 4 million Indians came to work in Malaysia. Indians accounted for 76% of all labour on plantations, while 96% of those employed in tin mines where Chinese (Bhopal & Rowley 2005:565).
Malaysia has made significant economic progress and has been referred to as ‘a second-tier tiger’, referring to the newly industrialized countries (NICs) in the Southeast Asian region.

During the 1990s, Malaysia became the world’s sixth largest exporter of manufactured goods and one of the more prosperous countries in Southeast Asia (Barlow 2001:3). From 1987 until 1997, when the country was hit by the Asian financial crisis, the average annual GDP growth was more than 8%. Between 1991 and 2005, GDP growth was 4.1% on average; in 2006, GDP per capita was USD 11,914 (IMF 2006). Malaysia is categorized as an upper-middle-income economy.11

In the following sections, I take a closer look at Malaysia’s economic development and the concomitant migration policies. I pay particular attention to the mid 1990s – when the Bangladeshi migrants this study focuses on were recruited to work in Malaysian industry – and to the Asian economic crisis in the second half of the 1990s, which had a profound effect on migrant workers and migration policies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.3: Structure of the Malaysian economy (% of GDP)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: based on figures of the Ministry of Finance: Malaysia GDP by sector 2007.

3.8 The role of the manufacturing sector until the 1997 crisis

Over the past decades, a great effort has been made to integrate Malaysia’s ethnic groups into a unified Malaysian nation. In 1969, the country was shaken by communal conflict. High unemployment among young urban Malays was regarded as the underlying reason for the race riots. The key development strategy of the New Economic Policy (NEP) shifted to promoting growth and social equality. Economic development played a key role in the steps taken towards achieving socio-economic redistribution and the eradication of unemployment and poverty, and hence helped

11. The percentage of the population living below the poverty line dropped from 53% in 1970 to 7.5% in 1999; more recent figures are not available. Life expectancy for women is 74 years and for men 68 years; the infant mortality rate is 10 per 1000 births. The literacy rate for women is 85% and for men 92% (UNDP 2003; World Bank 2003b; Department of Statistics Malaysia 2003; Economic Planning Unit Malaysia 2002:1; UNESCO 2003; World Bank 2006b).
to prevent social unrest. The strong expansion of the industrial sector and rapid wage growth were powerful agents in reducing poverty and promoting equity and social harmony. All ethnic groups shared in it, although not equally (Pillai 1999:179; Athukorala 2001a:17; Barlow 2001:3). The Malaysian government had been a major player in the country’s industrial relations and economic development.

Malaysia’s rapid GDP growth is largely attributed to increases in manufactured exports, which the government actively promoted by means of a policy regime of open trade and liberal investment, which attracted foreign investors. The comprehensive free trade zone (FTZ) scheme implemented in the early 1970s included low import tariffs and such provisions as tax exemptions and limitations on labour union activities. The timing was right: companies in Japan and the newly industrialized Asian countries were looking for investment possibilities elsewhere due to the deterioration of their export position. Malaysia attracted a massive wave of foreign direct investment (FDI), particularly from these regions. Foreign investment and foreign firms played a major role in the economic progress of the country: by the mid 1990s, foreign firms accounted for over 75% of total manufactured exports (Menon 2001:39; Rasiah 2001:166; Athukorala 2001a:16-23).

By 1995, manufactured exports comprised 80% of all exports. Electronics and electrical goods provided the highest share of manufactured exports (65% in 1997), followed by wood products (5%), chemicals and chemical products (5%), clothing and textiles (4%), and transport equipment (4%) (MITI 1997). Not surprisingly, between the mid 1970s and the mid 1990s, most new employment came from the rapidly expanding manufacturing sector: from 1987 to 1996, its direct contribution to total employment was as high as 63% (Athukorala 2001a:16-23). The share of employment in manufacturing as a percentage of total employment climbed from 14% in the mid 1970s to 27% in 1996.

Initially, Malaysia had a ‘large reservoir’ of male and female labour – a major requisite for attracting foreign investment for labour-intensive manufacturing. Due to economic progress, unemployment in Malaysia dropped from a peak of 8.3% in 1986 to 3% and less in the period 1993-1997, leading to a situation of virtual full employment. From the 1970s onwards, foreign multinational companies started to attract large numbers of young Malaysian women to work in their factories. Many young women commuted or migrated from rural to urban areas. In Malaysia, women

12. Policies have been characterized by affirmative actions towards the bumiputras (native Malays), as they were perceived to have been left behind socio-economically, especially compared to the Chinese. Many people regard as discriminatory certain policies, such as quotas for universities (whereby Chinese students have a clear disadvantage compared to Malays) and policies regarding the ownership of firms (at least 30% of the ownership of wealth must be in the hands of Bumiputera). However, others feel that in view of the country’s impressive economic progress and social stability, these policies have served their purpose. For the past decades, Malaysia has been led by the Barisan Nasional – a coalition party of the three ethnic groups, but dominated by the United Malays National Organization, which from 1981 to 2003 was led by the prime minister, Dr Mahathir. Whilst officially a democracy, Malaysia is often criticized for its autocratic ruling, as exemplified by the arrest and detention without charges of critics under the Internal Security Act (ISA).
have traditionally engaged in labour outside their homes. Women are responsible for harvesting and many go to the market to sell their produce (Ng 1999:35). Although social resistance to the large-scale employment of women in the manufacturing sector was not as strong as it was in Bangladesh, it initially faced opposition and stigmatization. By the beginning of the 1990s, factory employees’ working and payment conditions had improved, mainly due to the decreasing labour reserve. However, many switched jobs when they were offered better wages elsewhere.

Malaysia’s economic development is largely based on the availability of cheap labour; as cheap labour became increasingly scarce, many companies started recruiting foreign labour. The economic growth of the 1990s was mainly input driven, with more and more capital and labour added to generate output expansion. Despite its economic success, economists often argue that Malaysia’s industrial strategy is not sustainable in the long run. The high import content – especially in electronics, electrical products and garment production – makes for low local value-added and low net foreign exchange earnings (Pillai 1998:259; Rasiah 2001). FDI started to fall after 1996, alongside a worldwide glut in electronics, which depressed growth in manufacturing. The major reason for the decline in FDI, however, was the exhaustion of labour reserves since the mid 1990s.

Meanwhile, in many industrial sectors, competition increased from countries in the region that had cheaper labour. More flexible labour practices were increasingly used to reduce labour costs (Ng 2004b:2). Companies relied more and more on contract workers and home workers. Some manufacturing companies, particularly in the garment sector, relocated their production to rural areas where wages were lower and labour was more readily available (Crinis 2002:159). Meanwhile, more companies utilized foreign contract workers to fill their vacancies (Rudnick 1996). Capital had been ‘foreign’ all along, and now the workforce increasingly became foreign, too.

3.9 Foreign workers

As in colonial times, a salient feature of the contemporary Malaysian economy is its strong reliance on foreign workers. In 1996 there were officially more than 745,000 foreign workers in the country; a year later, following a massive legalization scheme, this figure had almost doubled to more than 1,470,000 (Kassim 2001a:132). Estimates of the remaining number of undocumented workers varied from several hundred thousand to more than one million. Foreign labour was estimated to account for as much as 15-30% of the country’s labour force (Rasiah 2001:169-176; Tan & Ariff 2001:62). The government repeatedly claimed that the recruitment of foreign labour was a temporary measure to fill the labour gaps created by Malaysia’s enormous economic success (Rudnick 1996). However, by 2006 the number of documented foreign workers in the country had risen to 1,820,000 (New Straits Times 12-09-2006); the number of undocumented foreigners was estimated at about half that number. Furthermore, there are no signs that Malaysia’s economic dependence on foreign workers will come to an end any time soon.
Table 3.4: Documented foreign workers in Peninsular Malaysia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>414,336</td>
<td>515,983</td>
<td>576,441</td>
<td>586,796</td>
<td>1,190,437</td>
<td>789,684</td>
<td>847,415</td>
<td>1,820,680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job sector (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic work</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plantation</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total %</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Country of origin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>50.1</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>62.7</td>
<td>63.9</td>
<td>63.6</td>
<td>64.0</td>
<td>68.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total %</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kassim 2001a: 132 (based on published and unpublished data of several government departments); ISIS, 2003; and Kanapthy 2006.

Between independence and the late 1980s, Indonesians who crossed the Straits of Malaysia on their own accord fulfilled foreign labour needs. Due to long-standing relationships and cultural similarities, Indonesians were historically not regarded as ‘foreigners’ (Wong 2006). By the late 1980s, the increasing presence of foreign workers from additional countries led to more regulation of migration. Although undocumented labour migration could not be stopped, migration became increasingly institutionalized. During the early 1990s, legal recruitment was granted to Indian, Bangladesh, and Pakistani workers. In Malaysia, the recruitment of foreign workers remains ongoing as businesses increasingly require foreign workers to meet their human capital needs. During the 1990s, the Malaysian government significantly increased the legal recruitment of foreign workers. The increase in the number of foreign workers was largely due to the expansion of Malaysia’s manufacturing sector. Furthermore, in the late 1990s, Malaysia significantly increased the number of documented foreign workers due to the demand for foreign workers. The modernization of the Malaysian economy also led to the increased demand for foreign workers. The Malaysian government has taken several measures to control the inflow of foreign workers into the country. However, despite these efforts, the number of undocumented foreign workers remains high. In recent years, the Malaysian government has increased efforts to reduce the inflow of undocumented foreign workers.
only for domestic services, plantation workers and construction. In 1991, an estimated 70% of all workers in construction were foreign; by 1994, 60% of all plantation workers were migrant workers. In response to manufacturers’ requests for foreign labour, in 1992 the government allowed this sector to recruit foreign workers provided the labour was used for export production only and the share of migrant labour did not exceed 30% of a company’s total labour force (Pillai 1992). Several studies point out that the percentage of foreign workers employed by many individual companies is much higher than 30% (Rudnick 1996:40, Smakman 2004; Kung & Wang 2006).\(^{13}\)

Since 1997, the manufacturing sector has been the single largest employer of documented foreign workers in Malaysia, accounting for about 30% of the total (see table 3.4). Likewise, 33% of the workforce in manufacturing is composed of migrants (The Star 17-03-2006). According to estimates of documented and undocumented migrants combined, 80% of the migrants who worked in Malaysia over the last decades were Indonesian; many of those who arrived before the 1990s have since settled there (Pillai 2005; Wong 2006). During the 1990s, Bangladeshis comprised the second largest group of migrants in Malaysia (see table 3.4) and the second largest group of foreign workers (after Indonesians) employed in manufacturing (Wong 2006:217).

A breakdown by gender of migrant workers is not available due to poor gender data collection by the department of statistics. Nevertheless, the 1990s were marked by a significant increase in female migrants recruited for jobs other than domestic work. Kassim (2001a:115) estimated that about a third of all foreign workers in manufacturing and half of all those in service jobs (including domestic work) were female.

3.10 The Asian economic crisis and its impact on migrant workers

The Asian financial crisis started in July 1997 in Thailand and soon spread to other countries in the region. Given Malaysia’s impressive economic performance, many were taken aback by the effects of the crisis on the Malaysian ringgit and the wider economy, as a number of Malaysia’s macroeconomic fundamentals were sound at

\(^{13}\) A study among textile and garment factories in the state of Penang in 1994 found that while on average 29% of the labour force was foreign, in several companies the proportion exceeded 30%, with the figure for some subcontractors reaching 90% (Rudnick 1996). A 2000/2001 survey among apparel producers in Malaysia found that on average 37% of companies’ labour forces consisted of foreign workers. Among subcontractors the figure was as high as 50%. It was also found that domestically oriented companies hired foreign workers, which at the time of the study was not allowed (Smakman 2004:263). Kung & Wang (2006) found that more than 50% of the total labour force in the Taiwanese owned companies he studied consisted of foreign workers. The rather stark divergences from the 30% rule reflect the flexibility with which rules are applied. According to a government employee at the immigration department, apart from the guiding rule, there are case-by-case revisions if a company needs more workers (interviews courtesy of Garcés-Mascareñas 2006).
the time. Although there had been signs of concern about economic vulnerability before the crisis, they had been hidden beneath the country’s impressive performance record (Yap 2001:45; Rasiah 2001:167; Athukorala 2001b:22; Jomo 2001).

However, the events in the Malaysian financial markets in 1997-1998 – which took place in the wake of the crisis in neighbouring Thailand and led to the crash of the Malaysian ringgit – cannot be explained by domestic vulnerabilities alone. These events were also triggered by panic among international market players and the massive sell-off of stocks and the dumping of domestic currencies. The Malaysian ringgit subsequently plunged from 2.48 ringgits to the US dollar in March 1997 to 3.77 ringgits to the dollar by the end of the year, and reached an all-time low of 4.88 ringgits to the dollar in January 1998. In September 1998, the ringgit was pegged to the US dollar at 3.8, which helped to insulate the economy from the continued adverse external situation and regain some monetary autonomy (Yap 2001:46-57; Jomo 2001). This strategy combined with other economic measures paid off: GDP growth rates, which had slowed down in 1997 and had contracted by -7.4% in 1998, slowly increased to 5.8% in 1999 (see table 3.5). Additionally, a revival in global demand for electric and electronic products led to a major resurgence in exports in 1999, which helped to further improve the trade balance (Rasiah 2001:186; Athukorala 2001b:21). Although GDP growth has been going up, pre-crisis growth rates have not been re-established. Nevertheless, in recent years the manufacturing sector has again been growing steadily; in 2006, the growth rate was 7% (World Bank 2007).

Table 3.5: GDP growth and growth per sector

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GDP growth %</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>-7.4</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>-0.6</td>
<td>-2.5</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>-2.8</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>-0.6</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mining</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>-1.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>-13.4</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>-5.9</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>-24.0</td>
<td>-4.4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>-1.5</td>
<td>-1.6</td>
<td>-0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>-0.4</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Malaysia’s Ministry of Finance and World Bank 2007

As a consequence of the economic crisis, many workers were made redundant while others had to ‘voluntarily’ resign. The sectors most affected were manufacturing and

14. Rapid growth had helped to sustain low inflation and falling unemployment rates over the decade prior to the economic crisis.
15. Malaysia had one significant advantage over the other crisis-affected economies: it did not face a savings-investment deficit and overall imbalances with international payments commitments (debts); this was due to strong surpluses recorded in the capital account. Malaysia thus also had more leverage to decide on what policies to apply to tackle the crisis instead of having to obey IMF stipulations as neighbouring countries had to (Rasiah 2001). For further reading: Rasiah 2001; Athukorala 2001b; Yap 2001; Jomo 2001.
construction. A total of 60,000 workers were said to have lost their jobs in the first year after the crisis. This number is likely to be an underestimate, since voluntary lay-offs and the dismissal of undocumented and casual workers were not registered (Pillai 1998:267). Unemployment rates increased from 2.4% in 1997 to 3.2% in 1999, while labour force participation dropped from 87% to 83% for men and from 47% to 44% for women (Athukorala 2001a:20; Rasiah 2001:189). Industrial workers were affected by pay cuts and a decrease in overtime work. Numerous smaller firms became insolvent and went bankrupt. In 1999, the earnings of individual workers in the manufacturing industry declined by 1%, as compared to an increase of 6.4% during 1998. Increasing numbers of Malaysian families had to rely on public services since their incomes had dropped while prices had gone up. Although the impact of the crisis on Malaysian families is argued to have been moderate in comparison to the situation of local citizens in neighbouring countries, many Malaysians suffered from the effects of the crisis.

In Malaysia, the brunt of the crisis was shouldered by foreign workers, as the main impact of lay-offs fell on them. Many had to leave the country, as their annual contracts were not renewed (Yusof 2001; OECD 2001). Malaysia had toughened its stand on foreign workers in an attempt to save the jobs of local workers. Exact numbers of redundancies among the local workers are not available, since the figures are incomplete. Nevertheless, as Kassim (2001b:263) points out, the 187,000 undocumented workers who opted for voluntary repatriation between September and November 1998 alone, far exceed the total number of local workers made redundant during that whole year. Thus, the momentous decline in the number of documented migrant workers by almost 575,000 (39%) between 1997 and 1999 (Kassim 2001a:132) needs to be understood in the context of the Asian economic crisis.

As early as mid 1998, employers began to complain of labour shortages once more, stating they could not find local workers. In response, 120,000 permits were issued. When the economy began to recover in 1999, mainly due to a revival in manufacturing, a further 70,000 new permits were issued for the recruitment of foreign workers, followed in subsequent years by more ad hoc allocations (Kassim 2001a:115; OECD 2001:12).

3.11 Migration policies

Malaysia’s foreign labour policies have been variously described as ‘fluid’, ‘unpredictable’ and possessing a ‘stop-go’ quality (Rudnick 1996; Pillai 1997; Kassim 1998b, 2001b; Menon 2001; stakeholders interviewed by Garcés-Mascareñas 2006). Ad hoc permission to recruit a quota of migrant labourers often results from short-term deficiencies in certain sectors and successful lobbying by employers’

16. It was argued that due to the trade unions’ lack of power, only few programmes have been launched to help those who lost their jobs, although some effort was made by the government to mitigate the negative effects on the poor.
federations. There has been no comprehensive long-term policy and policies are often not transparent. 17

Ambiguities in Malaysia’s migration policies reflect on the one hand the government’s compliance with employers’ requests for foreign labour and the consequent perpetuation of the country’s overall economic dependence on foreign workers, and on the other hand the desire to curb the number of foreign workers and the associated ‘social costs’ of migration. Malaysia wants a cheap and flexible labour force, but would rather not host migrants.

The recruitment of migrant workers is subject to strict rules. Apart from meeting the fluctuating labour demands of the economy through the recruitment of flexible labour, the underlying aim of Malaysia’s migration policy is to prevent migrants from becoming permanent settlers. Garcés-Mascareñas (2006:5) highlights three characteristics of a labour migration system as employed by Malaysia. The first salient characteristic is labour circulation, as it assures the process of labour maintenance and renewal. The costs of renewal are borne by the labour supplying country, flexibility is guaranteed and social costs are minimized. Migrants must come without dependants or spouses, and they may not marry local citizens. If a migrant woman becomes pregnant, she is repatriated. A migrant worker could be recruited on a two-year contract that could be extended to a maximum of six or seven years. Since 2002, contracts are generally given on a three-year basis and can be extended for a maximum of five years – except for domestic workers, who can remain with an employer for as long as their services are required (ISIS 2003:21; Kanapthy 2006). Migrant workers also have to undergo medical examinations before migrating and before contract renewal.

The second characteristic of a labour migration system, as witnessed in Malaysia, is the restriction of mobility imposed on migrants: they are tied to the employers for whom they were recruited. When contracts expire, migrants must return to their home country. Once a migrant leaves his or her employer, he or she is rendered undocumented, labelled ‘illegal’ and may be detained and deported. The third characteristic of a migrant labour system is the powerlessness of the foreign worker due to the temporary nature of migration and the restrictions on mobility. Although labour legislation in principle guarantees certain rights to foreign workers, these rights are easily violated due to slack law enforcement. Migrant workers’ capacity to bargain is undermined by their dependence on their employers, who can cancel their contract and have them deported, which in turn keeps wages down.

The Malaysian government regards the issue of undocumented labour as a huge problem. Undocumented migrants are mostly referred to as ‘illegals’ and are seen as criminals, brought in by criminal syndicates, who have to be rooted out. Since the 1980s, Malaysia has continuously tried to curb undocumented labour migration. Throughout the 1990s, several legalization schemes led to the registration of more than a million migrants. Many more were believed to remain undocumented. Na-

17. For a fascinating exploration of the continuities and discontinuities of contemporary labour regulations compared to those under colonial rule, see Garcés-Mascareñas 2006.
tionwide crackdowns on ‘illegal’ migrants were intensified from 1993 onwards. Programmes to curb undocumented migration, known as Ops Nyah I and II (Ops Nyah literally means ‘get rid of’), are ongoing. By 1999, almost 350,000 migrants had been repatriated under these schemes. An additional 188,000 left voluntarily and about 1,450,000 had come forward under legalization programmes (Kassim 2001a:135). After 2000, these schemes were further increased: in 2000, some 100,000 migrants were deported, and in 2001, a further 158,420 were deported (Wong 2006:222).

As in other Asian countries, irregularities and forgery are quite common. Unlicensed labour recruiters and agents have been found guilty of charging exorbitant fees, falsifying documents, and misleading workers about wages and working conditions (cf. Goss & Lindquist 1995; Wickramasekera 2002; Kanapathy 2006:16). Employers generally obtain their foreign workers with the assistance of recruitment agents. If an employer wants to recruit foreign workers, he or she must apply directly to the Immigration Department. When approval is granted, the employer may hire a recruiting agency and visit the sending countries in person to interview potential workers with the assistance of local recruitment agencies (Kassim 2001a:119). Apart from the high fees charged, the work permits migrants pay for are not always authentic. Many migrants find upon arrival that their documents are false; hence, they are undocumented, in other words, ‘illegal’. Corruption in both Bangladesh and Malaysia involving migration officers and politicians is a major obstacle to a just migration regime. Some migrants are identified at the airport and immediately sent back, while others start to work undocumented for a fraction of the money they had anticipated. A few eventually buy ‘official’ documents. Others end up in detention camps before being deported (Rudnick 1996; Wong & Anwar 2003).

Corruption and the lack of law enforcement regarding recruitment in Bangladesh and Malaysia contribute importantly to high levels of undocumented labour (Wickramasekera 2002; Wong 2006:222; interviews with key persons courtesy of Garcés-Mascareñas 2006). Additionally, due to a lack of law enforcement, many migrants who are not paid as promised or as stipulated by law see no option but to look for another employer by absconding or overstaying. They become undocumented in order to earn money and pay off the debts they incurred before their departure. Hence, documented and undocumented migration statuses are intricately linked. Current undocumented migration results to some extent from the rigidities of the migrant labour system itself (Rudnick 1996:75; Garcés-Mascareñas 2006:11).

As seen earlier, the economic crisis impacted migration policies and further curtailed the position of migrant workers. The government, fearing another economic downturn, wanted to retain temporary migrant workers as a buffer; the migrants are submissive, have few rights and are easily laid off (Kassim 2001b:277). The two largest migrant groups in the country – Indonesian and Bangladeshi workers – were

---

18. Many recruitment agents in Malaysia are ex-government employees (interviews with key persons by Garcés-Mascareñas 2006 courteously made available).
19. Meanwhile, there are also migrants who knowingly arrive undocumented.
to be reduced in size in an attempt to increase ‘national security’. It was to be ensured that ‘no foreign nationals from one single country dominate the local labour market’ (The Star 3 September 2003).

These measures were a response to several incidents in which Indonesian and Bangladeshi migrant workers had been adamant and persistent in defending their rights, which involved some strikes as well (AMC 2003:211). In October 2003, the 7-year-long ban on recruitment from Bangladesh was lifted. Malaysia and Bangladesh signed a new memorandum of understanding, after which the ‘manpower export’ was expected to resume (Daily Star 14 Oct. 2003). However, it never really did. Although many employers want more Bangladeshi workers – as they are regarded as obedient and hard working and they easily pick up the language – their requests are generally not honoured (Smakman 2004: Kung & Wang 2006; interviews courtesy of Garcés-Mascareñas 2006). Although recruitment was resumed in September 2006, it was halted again a few weeks later because the Malaysian authorities had found that recruiters in Bangladesh were charging exorbitant fees. Due to migrants’ urgent financial needs, the Malaysian authorities feared that they would resort to illegal activities once they were in the country.

Meanwhile, Malaysia has reinforced its foreign workers policy by negotiating memoranda of understanding with a large number of sending countries, including Pakistan, China, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Thailand, India, Philippines, Indonesia and Myanmar. Nevertheless, in January 2008, the leading countries of origin for migrants in Malaysia are Indonesia (1.1 million), Nepal and Bangladesh (300,000) (Migration News, 2008).

To regularize the import of migrant workers, Malaysia announced in 2005 that all intake of migrant workers was to be carried out on a government-to-government basis to ensure that migrants are not exploited by labour agents. The government appointed 58 outsourcing companies to supply and manage labour. However, the initial ban on agents was lifted when the authorities realized that the use of agents was an ‘unstoppable trend’. The list of designated source countries was changed to comprise the Philippines, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Thailand, Vietnam, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. To ensure that migrant workers are not liable to abuse and are able to better integrate into the Malaysian work environment, the government introduced new measures to expose migrant workers to Malaysian laws and culture. As of 1 November 2005, all countries (except Indonesia) have to conduct induction courses for workers coming to Malaysia; if migrants fail, they will not be issued visas or work permits (Kanapathy 2006:14-17).

As Wong (2006:225) argues, after the turn of the new millennium, the emphasis in migration policies changed from cultural if not ethnic affinity (i.e. Indonesians shared the same ethnicity with Malays, and Bangladeshis have the same religion) to cultural and ethnic distance in order to maintain social distance and transience. This policy change appears to have been aimed at weakening migrants’ potential bargaining power, keeping wages low and further discouraging migrant workers from settling down. However, the presence in the country of an estimated 2.4 million migrants (including undocumented workers) shows that the government has not been
very successful in reducing its reliance on foreign labour (24% of those employed in Malaysia are migrant workers). Government officials have repeatedly promised employers in the plantation and manufacturing sector assistance in hiring foreign workers. These sectors would not be able to meet export orders without them. Migrants are needed for the sake of Malaysia’s economic growth; however, it is still believed to be a ‘temporary measure’ (Kassim 2001a:116; cf. The Star 18-05-2004; Kanaphy 2006:17). In 2006, migrants comprised 33% of the workforce in the manufacturing industry (The Star 17-03-2006).

3.12 Legal protection of migrant workers

A policy was introduced in 1991 to ensure equal wages and benefits for foreign workers in order to prevent employers from replacing locals with foreign workers. Hence, in theory, migrant workers should receive the same wages and benefits as local workers, and thus should not be ‘cheaper’ (Pillai 1992; Rudnick 1996). Internationally, the ILO conventions that specifically concern the protection of the rights of migrants, C. 97 and C. 143, are not ratified by Malaysia - except for the state of Sabah. The basic human rights of all migrant workers are however, covered by universal human rights instruments and ILO core conventions, even if they are not ratified. 20

Many studies have shown that foreign workers in Malaysia are often paid less than local workers. Labour contracts, if they exist, are commonly breached. A strikingly large percentage of migrants do not receive fair wages or fair treatment. Various studies found that as many as 70% of all migrant workers were not paid what they were entitled to according to the relevant labour laws (Pillai 1995; Rudnick 1996; Lee & Sivananthiran 1996; Zahid 1998; Kassim 1998b, 2001b; Abdul-Aziz 2001). Moreover, several studies found that employers often prefer foreign to local workers, as they, unlike local workers, cannot readily ‘job-hop’ and are ‘diligent and compliant’ (Lee & Sivananthiran 1996:89; Rudnick 1996; Abdul-Aziz 2001; Smakman 2004). Some readily admit that foreign workers are cheaper than local workers.

The dominant underlying reason for this inequality is that in practice, migrants have little judicial protection. While in theory migrants and local workers should be treated equally and migrants can file a complaint with the Labour Office, in practice they rarely do. Since visas are tied to the work permit issued by their employers, migrant workers become ‘illegal’ as soon as they are dismissed, and have to leave the country. Employers thus have disproportionally large control over conditions for

migrant labour. In cases in which migrant workers took their employers to court, employers terminated their contracts. Migrants are usually deported or detained while awaiting the verdict, which can take years (Tenaganita 2005; Syed Shahir 2006). Not surprisingly, many migrants do not complain: they know that if they are sent home, they will be even worse off (Rudnick 1996).

It should be noted that in contemporary Malaysia, workers – whether local or foreign – have minimal bargaining power. Labour laws, in as far as they are intended to protect workers’ welfare, are often poorly administered and generally more supportive of managerial prerogatives. There are no minimum wages. As is the case in many export-oriented countries and in response to demands by foreign investors, the activities of trade unions are curbed in order to stimulate FDI. Consequently, employers in Malaysia exercise a high level of control in the workplace, and are not easily challenged by their employees (Todd, Lansbury & Davis 2004:2). Both the size and the structure of unions are heavily regulated: unions may not operate across industries, and the various ‘industries’ are narrowly defined. In many aspects, industrial relations under British rule formed the basis for the industrial relations and policies after independence.

During colonial rule, the large-scale labour recruitment from India and China initiated by the British interfered in the local labour market. The formation of labour unions was hampered and controlled, and ethnic divisions both in the workplace and in broader society became established. Ethnicity continues to be an organizing principle of politics and a significant factor in the political economy. The government has effectively fractured the working class in Malaysia along ethnic and interest lines. The persistence of ethnic identification among local workers has weakened class unity and diminished the role of labour unions (Caspersz 1998:267; Ng 2004a; Bhopal & Rowley 2005:561). Only a small percentage of all workers in industry are unionized (Todd, Lansbury & Davis 2004:16). A large proportion of the existing unions are in-house unions that are based on the Japanese model; management often controls these unions. Those companies and industries that have free unions and have negotiated collective agreements frequently have better working conditions and higher wages (Rudnick 1996).

3.13 Public discourse

The contribution made by foreign workers to Malaysia’s economic development is significant. As Kassim (1998b:18) argues:

If ‘made in Malaysia’ manufactured goods and products have remained competitive in price and can hold their own in world markets, it is due in no small measure to the inexpensive labour of foreign workers.

Malaysia’s modern urban skyline, its gleaming airport and the newly built cyber corridor were mainly built by foreign labour (Kassim 1998b:18; Menon 2001:41). Like elsewhere in the world, this receiving country rarely mentions the positive con-
tributions made by migrant workers to their economy and society. Instead, migrants are blamed for adversities and social problems, particularly in times of crisis or recession (Wickramasekera 2002:4). Trade unions and citizens have been increasingly concerned about the large number of migrant workers and the adverse effects on local workers’ wages. Cheap labour imports have held down the wages of unskilled workers. It has been widely argued that the growth in real wages in the 1990s would have been sharper had it not been for the influx of migrant workers. Moreover, importing cheap labour as a short-term measure adversely affects the long-term competitiveness of Malaysian manufacturing. Little effort is made to upgrade production to higher value-added production (Pillai 1999; Rasiah 2001:186; Tan & Ariff 2001; Athukorala 2001b). Areas of concern that existed before the economic crisis have not been sufficiently tackled. So far, government policies to improve the institutional support in order to generate the human and technical capabilities needed to upgrade production systems and increase value added have fallen short.

Both politicians and the media have consistently blamed foreign workers for various ‘social costs’. Migrants are claimed to be more criminal and to jeopardize the social security, housing and healthcare systems. This further increased after the economic crisis; migrants were resented for taking local workers’ jobs and keeping wages down. Equal wages and equal treatment of local and foreign workers would in the long run benefit all workers, whatever their nationality. So far, however, few steps have been taken in this direction.

3.14 Conclusion

Both Bangladesh and Malaysia are economically highly dependent on migration: Bangladesh needs the employment and remittances, while Malaysia needs a source of cheap labour. This particular migration system was created by the confluence of several parameters. The migration flows between the two countries started with the rather arbitrary migrations of some pioneers and took off in response to the sudden economic need for migrant labour in Malaysia. Furthermore, the Gulf War in the early 1990s temporarily halted migration to the Middle East and indirectly boosted the flow of Bangladeshi migrants to Malaysia. Affinities based on a shared religion facilitated agreements between governments. However, migration flows are often volatile and are easily disrupted and redirected by economic and political fluctuations in the international arena, as shown by the impact of the Asian economic crisis on migrants and migration flows. Migrants are particularly vulnerable to changes in the global political economy. Moreover, the protection of migrant workers’ rights is lacking at both ends of the migration flow.

The vast majority of Bangladeshi migrants are male, a fact that is closely related to gender notions and relations in Bangladesh and the concomitant customs and migration policies that restrain women from working or migrating. Significant numbers of women want to migrate but lack both the financial and the infrastructural means to do so legitimately, which has resulted in large numbers of women migrating as undocumented workers. Simultaneously, women’s search for jobs and the
challenges they face by venturing out in public space are to a large degree related to definitions of womanhood and marriage. How these structural factors have influenced individual migrant women and men’s lives becomes clearer in the following chapters.
CHAPTER 4: THE FIELD SETTING: METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES REGARDING GENDER-SENSITIVE RESEARCH

During the 1990s, male Bangladeshi workers became increasingly visible in the streets and neighbourhoods of urban Peninsular Malaysia. They could be seen working on construction sites or sitting on a bus kilang (factory bus) going to or coming back from the free trade zones. They worked at petrol stations filling up cars, and they served the tarik (milk-tea), roti chanai (Malay breakfast) or a banana leaf meal at local restaurants, while addressing their customers in Malay. In the evenings, they could be seen dressed meticulously and riding their bicycles in the residential areas where they lived. Bangladeshi migrant women, on the other hand, were not as easily discerned: they were far fewer in number and did not appear in public as often as their male counterparts.

This was the environment I encountered when I embarked on this study in 1999. During my earlier study among migrant workers in the textile and garment industry in the same state (Penang) in 1993/4, it had not been difficult to locate and talk to the Bangladeshi migrants who were working in the factories I studied. At the time, there were few Bangladeshi women in Penang. Locating Bangladeshi women for the current study proved difficult. In addition, the Bangladeshi women were more reserved and less open than the Bangladeshi men.

While the fieldwork was challenging at times, it provided many unexpected, wonderful opportunities at other moments. Methodological decisions that had appeared sensible before arriving in the field needed frequent evaluation and amendment. Exploring and analysing the research process is of importance for several reasons. First, it provides context for the empirical chapters. It shows that the challenges that I encountered were intrinsically linked to the lived realities of the migrant women, and as such are part of the analysis. Second, since the relationship between research subjects and researchers is hardly ever neutral, the positioning of the researchers and the consequences for the relationships between them and the research subjects needs attention. Lastly, although studies sometimes appear to reflect reality as though it can be neatly and logically ordered and that data collection processes were smooth and easily conducted, this is often not the case (Nencel 2001). By exposing the researcher’s ‘jockeying between clarity and utter confusion’ (Wolf 1992:6) in terms of understanding and conceptualizing data, the processual nature of research is emphasized. This may be helpful to others who are struggling with similar problems while conducting fieldwork, and also allow contextualization of the epistemological and methodological decisions made.

Data were collected in both Malaysia and Bangladesh. Migrants were interviewed at different points in time and during different stages of their migration process. Much work on migration is conducted either in the receiving community or in the home community, and hence generally encompasses only one phase in the migration process. However, collecting data in both locales and in different phases of the migration process yields richer data, thus capturing people’s transnational experiences more fully (cf. Mahler & Pessar 2001:455). As explained in Chapter 2, for reasons of
comparison we also collected data on male Bangladeshi migrant workers as far as such was possible. For logistical reasons, men were not incorporated to the same extent during the post-migration phase.

4.1 The research sites

I conducted preliminary research in Malaysia in the period October-December 1998. The purpose was to find out whether the study outline needed amending, given the changes in the economic and political climate resulting from the economic crisis that had started some months previously. Many migrant workers were said to have lost their jobs. Foreign workers in Malaysia were leaving at the rate of 1,000 a day in October 1998; an estimated 50,000 left in the last two weeks of October (Migration News 1998). I found that Bangladeshi migrants were still employed, although many had been affected by the crisis.

The actual fieldwork in Malaysia was conducted between July and November 1999 and in September and October 2000. In Bangladesh, the fieldwork was conducted in April 1999 and between December 2000 and June 2001. During a two-week revisit to both countries in 2004, data were checked and amended. The study began with a survey among 140 Bangladeshi migrant women and 60 Bangladeshi men working in factories in Malaysia, followed by interviews and numerous informal conversations in Malaysia and, later, in Bangladesh after these migrants had returned home (see table 4.1). A mixed method approach was 12 women and/or their relatives were revisited employed. I worked with a research assistant during each of the field periods. During the first fieldwork in Malaysia (Malaysia I), I was joined by Hasina Ahmed, a social researcher affiliated to Dhaka University. During Malaysia II, I was assisted by Jenneke Arens, a Dutch researcher who has lived and worked in Bangladesh and is fluent in Bengali. During Bangladesh II, I worked with Farhana Syeda, a young Bengali researcher/photographer.

The choices made, the methods chosen and the challenges encountered are discussed throughout this chapter. I start by explaining why I chose the particular research sites, and then discuss the research methods used. Finally, I elaborate on the migrants’ and the researchers’ subject positions and the ways in which these affected the relationship and the data collection.

Malaysia

The research sites in Malaysia were the states of Penang and Kedah. Penang was selected because it is one of the country’s three leading industrial centres (Wangel 2001:3). From my earlier study among factory workers in the industrial export sector in Penang, I knew that many companies employed Bangladeshi migrant men and women (Rudnick 1996). During the initial stage of the present study, it became clear that a few hundred Bangladeshi women were employed in export-producing factories in nearby towns in the adjacent state of Kedah, an industrial centre that was
Table 4.1: Fieldwork structuring

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey</th>
<th>Semi-structured Interviews</th>
<th>Repeated informal interviews and conversations with migrants*</th>
<th>Informal conversations and interviews with migrants’ relatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia I – 1999</td>
<td>139 women 60 men</td>
<td>30 women 15 men</td>
<td>39 women 12 men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia II – 2000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>43 women 13 men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh I –1999</td>
<td></td>
<td>5 returned women</td>
<td>Relatives of 2 returned women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh II –2001</td>
<td></td>
<td>27 returned women 4 returned men</td>
<td>Relatives of 17 returned migrant women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh III – 2004</td>
<td></td>
<td>7 returned women 11 returned women</td>
<td>Relatives of 5 women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh IV – 2006/7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The women who took part in the Malaysia II study were also interviewed during Malaysia I. The majority of the women (19 of the 27) who were repeatedly visited during Bangladesh II in 2001, were also repeatedly met with and interviewed while they were in Malaysia.

The research sites

79
By 1996 (the year in which most of the Bangladeshi migrants in this study had arrived in Malaysia) there were 736 factories in Penang’s industrial parks employing a total of close to 200,000 workers. The electronics and electrical sector is by far the dominant sector in Penang; in 1999, it comprised 152 companies employing 172,000 workers (Wangel 2001:7). The state of Kedah has 20 industrial parks that between them accommodate over 400 export-oriented manufacturing companies, both local and foreign. Several industrial parks are strategically located in southern Kedah, profiting from their proximity to Penang. The key industries are electronic and electrical products (including wafer fabrication), automotive and heavy industries (FMM 2004), and garment industries.

The snowball sampling technique was used to locate Bangladeshi migrant women. In order to be as inclusive as possible, several measures were taken to find contacts, namely: stopping by houses in residential areas where Bangladeshi women were seen entering or hanging laundry; asking Bangladeshi friends and shopkeepers where Bangladeshi women worked and lived; asking a labour unionist for contacts; and asking migrant women to refer us to other migrant women. This method was rather exhaustive: after several weeks, we found ourselves being referred back to the same factories and the same women, and the map of factories that hired Bangladeshi women seemed complete.

Although the industrial structure of the two states differed, the factories where Bangladeshi women worked had many similarities with regard to production processes, working conditions and wages. The women and men interviewed worked in one of ten factories, the majority of which were export-oriented multinationals in electronic appliances, garments or textiles. Of the women interviewed, 87% worked in the four largest companies; 27% of the men who were included in the study worked at the same factories as the women. Other interviewees were the women’s neighbours who worked in the same industrial parks. Due to the lack of statistical data available on foreign workers by state or company, little can be said about the foreign workers’ prominence in factory employment in these states; however, as discussed in the previous chapter, their share is substantial (Rudnick 1996).

The way a respondent is approached is also important, as coming via or meeting up with management could raise suspicion among workers. Since the economic climate had become more uncertain and women migrants felt more vulnerable, it was

---

1. It should be noted, however, that several sectors heavily rely on supplying factories and workshops, which are generally not registered (particularly in the garment industry). The number of workers engaged in export production is hence expected to be larger.

2. This sector was followed by fabricated metal (14,000 workers, 160 companies), textiles and garments (12,000 workers in 26 companies), and the plastics industry (9,000 workers, 81 companies).

3. Particularly because of its proximity to the container terminal in Butterworth and the airport on the island itself.

4. Although the snowball method seemed exhaustive, it should be noted that we may have missed smaller workshops that employ Bangladeshi migrant women. One sweatshop was included in this study. The women (fewer than 20) working in one additional export-producing factory were not visited due to difficulties in getting in touch with them.
ethically imperative not to contact company officials for interviews, so as not to put women in uncomfortable situations, raise any suspicion or expose them to danger (cf. Lal 1996). At the time of the fieldwork, the companies studied employed a total of about 350 Bangladeshi women. Half of the factories were in Penang and half were in Kedah. Drawing on estimates from the women themselves, at the time of their arrival in Malaysia in 1995/6 at least 1000 Bangladeshi women worked in these factories.

We met the migrants in their homes. Most of the Bangladeshi women and men in Penang and Kedah lived in quiet residential neighbourhoods of small terraced houses that their companies had rented to accommodate their foreign workers. Their neighbours were generally local Malaysians and other Bangladeshis, and sometimes also Indonesian workers. The houses were sparsely furnished and generally overcrowded; maintenance was often long overdue. Women shared small bedrooms that contained several bunk beds. Although the managers of the companies kept an eye on the women’s social lives, they lived relatively independently, with a guard passing by every so often.

Kedah is characterized as being one of Malaysia’s ‘less developed states’, while Penang is one of the country’s more developed states (Wangel 2001). The migrants in Kedah lived in a medium-sized country town that is peopled predominantly by Malays and Muslims. The Bangladeshi neighbourhoods on the island of Penang, although also working class, were situated in what is regarded as a vibrant, modern town centre with a cosmopolitan allure. Apart from serving as an important economic and industrial hub, Penang is a centre for tourism. While Malays are the majority population in most areas in Malaysia, the Chinese are the largest ethnic community on Penang Island.

Although the settings the women lived in differed markedly, their lifestyles and routines were similar. In both environments women rarely left their neighbourhoods. Groceries were obtained from nearby markets, and they went to town for ‘shopping’ only once a month at the most. The majority of the women living in Kedah had been to Penang once or twice, generally for sightseeing on a company trip.

My research assistant and I were based in Penang. Local authorities tend to regard labour issues as a sensitive subject, and we knew that we would not stand out as much in cosmopolitan Penang as in a rural Malay town, where there are few Caucasians. We therefore drove back and forth. Extensive interviews were also conducted with key informants, such as Bangladeshi recruitment agents, the labour attaché at the Bangladesh High Commission, representatives of NGOs, labour unions and the employers’ federation, and academics who were working on these issues.

5. These suburban neighbourhoods have been erected all over urbanized Peninsular Malaysia to fulfil the needs of the new urban working classes and their nuclear families.
Bangladesh

The first field trip to Bangladesh (1999) served a triple purpose: to get in touch with academics and NGOs who were working on the issue; to find a female research assistant who would be willing to come to Malaysia; and to conduct initial interviews with women in a certain Dhaka neighbourhood from which a large number of women had migrated.

During the fieldwork in Bangladesh in 2001 (Bangladesh II), many of the migrant women we had met in 1999 and 2000 in Malaysia had already returned to Bangladesh, providing us with the opportunity to follow up on their lives during their post-migration stage. However, visiting them entailed much travel, as their homes were scattered across the countryside around Dhaka and further away, and this put limitations on who we could meet.

The majority of the women in Bangladesh who were included in this study were visited on several occasions. We met several of the women repeatedly over a period of five to seven years. During these visits, their relatives were informally interviewed as well. As for the nine women I had not met while they were in Malaysia (see table 4.1), two were ex-colleagues of women from factories we had studied but had left Malaysia before this study had begun. The seven remaining women all lived in the aforementioned neighbourhood in Dhaka. They had been working in electronics companies in the state of Selangor, Malaysia. Several of them had been interviewed in both 1999 and 2001. Concerning the male returnees, two men were first encountered in Malaysia, while two were met in Bangladesh only. I wanted to talk to more male returnees, but this was not possible due to logistical and time constraints.

In Bangladesh, I also interviewed key informants such as community workers, grass-roots organizations, NGO representatives and academics working on these issues. We spoke to recruitment agents only on rare occasions. Migrants generally did not want to talk to us, as they feared repercussions for their future migrations – particularly if they had already paid agents. Moreover, since recruiting migrants often entails illegal practices, we were advised by academics and NGO representatives to stay away from recruiters for our own safety. In 2004 and 2006/7, my research assistant Farhana Syeda conducted follow-up interviews with several returned migrant women and their families.

4.2 Research methods

The study of migration is an interdisciplinary subject that reflects different theoretical and methodological perspectives. The earliest empirically based migration studies were carried out by sociologists, who largely relied on qualitative research me-
thods. Over the past decades, as migration gained importance in academia and on the political agenda, political scientists, economists, criminologists, human geographers, anthropologists and other social scientists became more actively engaged in the subject, relying on either quantitative or qualitative research methods or a combination of both. Currently, the field of migration studies is dominated by economists and political scientists whose research objects are primarily policy oriented. Large-scale surveys are the prime method they use (Waters 2000:46; Mahler & Pessar 2006:30). This study presents strong arguments for the use of combined research methods.

The survey

Of the approximately 350 Bangladeshi migrant women who were located through snowball sampling in Penang and Kedah, 140 participated in the survey. We filled out the questionnaire with the women at their homes; the process took 30-45 minutes. Questions concerned basic sociocultural aspects of the women and their families, the decision-making process, wages and remittances. The men were chosen along similar lines, and the same questionnaire was used. However, given the larger number of Bangladeshi men working in Malaysia, the survey among Bangladeshi men was less representative than it was among the women. However, the main goal of including men in the survey was to be able to compare their situation with that of the women. Although the survey yielded important quantifiable socio-economic data, it became clear that many issues involving women’s migration were sensitive or controversial. As a result, answers were sometimes incomplete and ambiguous.

The need for adequate research methodologies in gendered migration studies is discussed extensively in a 1994 publication of the UN International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW). It points out that the lack of knowledge on female migration is to some extent related to the way that data are generally collected. In migration surveys, a common cause of bias is the widespread practice of interviewing only one household member—a proxy respondent, typically the male head of household. Moreover, as INSTRAW (1994:36) states:

---

6. The Chicago School of Sociology was the first to study migration systematically. The School was founded by academics who focused on the social problems encountered by the last great wave of immigration to the USA at the end of the 19th century (Waters 2000:44; Mahler & Pessar 2006:30).
7. Approximately 15% of the women we approached chose not to participate. Reasons ranged from suspicion or fear of negative repercussions to ‘no interest’.
8. An extensive survey among 200 returned migrant women had recently been conducted in Bangladesh (Siddiqui 2001). The researcher, Tasneem Siddiqui, and I felt that there was an academic need for in-depth information. Since I had the chance to meet the women I had met in Malaysia in Bangladesh as well, rich and unique data could be obtained; focusing on another survey would have had little added value.
A (...) common source of survey measurement error associated with respondent bias is that deriving from the [proxy-]respondent’s judgement concerning appropriate or socially acceptable answers. Respondents often tend to provide answers that paint a good picture of themselves and their family members, a picture consistent with their views of societal norms.

INSTRAW points out that the extent of women’s migration may be underestimated when it diverges from expected gender roles. More specifically, this may distort the specific characteristics of women’s migrations (1994:37). In order to avoid such biases, INSTRAW stresses that a survey should be conducted in the place of departure as well as in the place of arrival. Moreover, the mover – the woman herself – and her motivations should be central; one should not rely on male proxy respondents. Although these are valuable steps towards greater gender sensitivity in migration studies and improve the quality of the data obtained, sociocultural biases will not automatically be circumvented or revealed. INSTRAW’s analysis of methodological issues focuses exclusively on large-scale surveys that are carried out in order to obtain quantitative data. Qualitative research methods are not discussed or given any consideration. However, supplemental qualitative data are often needed to reveal gender dynamics within migration processes (cf. Donato et al. 2006:11; Mahler & Pessar, 2006:31).

Those studies that have contributed greatly to the understanding of gender and migration often also draw on ethno-graphic research (Morocvasic 1984, 2003; Mahler & Pessar 1991, 2006; Gamburd 2000; Phizacklea 2003). While quantitative positivist approaches to social science research often fail to contextualize the data collected in order to redress gender-linked biases in research design, qualitative research methods pay attention to the perspectives and understanding of subjects’ actions and beliefs, thus also providing and respecting an insider’s view (Mahler & Pessar 2006:30).

Women’s migration is quite common in many regions, and is on the rise in others. Yet in several of these places, women’s migrations evoke normative reactions and gendered expectations (INestRAW 1994:37; Eelens 1995; Lim 1995; Dannecker 1998; Beesey 2001; Blanchet 2002). Since in their daily lives women are frequently confronted with ideal-typical gender norms and the consequences of defying them, it is likely that migrant women may at times adjust their answers in surveys and interviews in order to conform, or conform more with desired gender roles. This bias was found in the initial responses of many women in this study. In the course of informal get-togethers, it gradually became clear that many of the initial answers and stories had been incomplete or even deceptive. For example, a seemingly simple question regarding someone’s marital status turned out to be less straightforward due to cultural expectations of marriage and gender roles. Therefore, some had concealed their true marital status: several women who had stated in the survey that they were single were later found to be divorced. The women’s migration incentives and personal stories sometimes contained aspects that were not entirely in line with sociocultural norms on appropriate behaviour for women in Bangladesh. Fear of stigmatization inclined women to represent themselves in ways that were perceived to be
socioculturally desired. Potentially contested aspects were left out. It should be noted that however partial or ambiguous, these representations were pivotal to the analysis, as the motivations and implications behind them revealed important aspects of women’s sociocultural embeddedness. Subsequent ethnographic inquiry based on increased trust between the respondents and the researchers greatly improved our understanding of the respondents’ hopes, fears, motivations and behaviour.

As Mahler and Pessar (2006:31) point out, to truly bring gender into migration studies, multiple research methods should be employed. Had I left the field shortly after completing the survey, and even if I had had several interviews and informal discussions, I would have come to rather different, and even misleading conclusions regarding the underlying motivations for these women’s migrations. It was only through repeated visits and informal conversations that additional dimensions of women’s migration were discovered. These gave a different edge to their migration motivations and ultimately to their subsequent experiences.

**Qualitative research methods**

Thirty semi-structured interviews with women and fifteen with men were conducted shortly after the survey was carried out. The women were randomly selected. Quotas were set to ensure that all marital statuses and backgrounds were represented. The interviews generally took 1.5-2.5 hours. Although valuable insights were gained, at times the stories told during these encounters were also altered to provide a more socioculturally correct self-representation, as became increasingly clear over time. During the many informal encounters in the subsequent months and the years thereafter, additional crucial insights were gained. It also needs to be acknowledged that applying qualitative research methods offers no guarantee that social biases will be circumvented. During each visit new aspects and stories came out that initially changed the scene and at times left me puzzled, but when pieced together with other stories, sometimes told by other persons, patterns emerged. Nevertheless, at times ambiguities arose that were never cleared up and I had no choice but to respect the women’s right to privacy and silence.

A topic that many researchers are frequently confronted with is gossip, that is, stories about others or particular situations in which people convey messages about how they see the world, their relationships or how they want to be perceived themselves. Some of what we know from these stories also slips into the analyses (van Vleet 2003:513). Whether the assertion is true or not is often of less significance than the meaning of the story to the narrator. Gossip thus draws attention to the social dynamics and relations within a given community. Nevertheless, the ‘evidence’ in gossiping is always partial and personal and should be considered carefully. In Chapter 8, I take a closer look at the role of gossip. Since there is often a discrepancy between what people say and what they do, participant observation was an important additional methodological tool (cf. Steenbeek 1995).

Logistically, it was not always easy to meet with the women. They worked long days and did overtime at night or during the weekends. The time available to visit them was thus limited. In the little spare time they had, the women needed to do
household tasks, run errands, meet friends and relatives, and rest. During the weekends we often visited them at their housing compounds for several hours or the whole day. While conversations were often fragmented, there was plenty of time for participant observation and chats. It was insightful to witness the daily affairs, conversations and dynamics between the women. Getting a chance to talk privately with a woman was often challenging, as the houses they lived in were crowded. Naturally, many women did not want to disclose more personal information in front of other women. We hence ‘hung out’ and went with the flow, chatting with those who were around; we sometimes tried to create more private situations or simply waited for them to occur.9

The setting in Bangladesh differed, as we already knew most of the women. Many were happily surprised that I had kept my ‘promise’ to visit them. Those I was meeting for the first time also felt safe in their environment and were eager to discuss their experiences of working in bidesh. Similar challenges, however, occurred in terms of finding privacy to talk. Neighbours and relatives would often drop in to see us, the foreign visitors. Whenever logistically possible, we would stay in a village for several days, which made it easier to obtain some privacy to talk more freely. We also informally interviewed other household members about the migration of their daughters, wives and sisters, and about the household situation in general. Most women and their families were visited three to six times over a period of several months.

In short, mixed methods were used for this study. The survey yielded valuable information, but extensive qualitative data collection was found imperative to amend, cross-examine, correct and contextualize the quantitative data.

4.3 Respondents’ and researchers’ social position in the study

As feminists and other researchers have convincingly argued, research is never entirely objective or value free. Like any other social interaction, research is embedded in the constitution of social identities. The way individuals present themselves, consciously and unconsciously, in any given context and at any given time is sometimes referred to as their ‘subject position’. Subject positions are shaped by an individual’s multiple identities and by factors related to specific spatial-temporal location and context, as well as by how subjects interpret particular situations. Subject positions are multiple and interact with those of others. The data collection process is influenced by who the researcher is, how he or she represents him- or herself, and the way he or she is perceived by the research subjects. Likewise, respondents actively shape their own representations, that is, the way they want to be regarded by others (Lal

---

9. It soon became clear that women were not comfortable with tape-recorded conversations. During the interviews I made notes, but later on we tried to memorize things, as this created the most relaxed atmosphere. As soon as we left, my research assistant and I would sit down and tape record the conversations as we could remember them between the two of us, a method that we found to be effective.
1996:204; Nencel 2001; Madge et al. 1997:89). In the following section, I take a closer look at other factors that influenced the subject positions of the respondents and the researchers, as well as the relationships between the two groups.

Migrant women and men

The way migrant women positioned themselves within the study was to a large extent influenced by structural aspects that impact their lives and well-being, namely the sociocultural context of the transnational Bangladeshi community, and conditions and experiences in the domain of work.

Community domain

As discussed in the previous chapter, Bangladeshi women who take unskilled or semi-skilled jobs outside their homes or countries are frequently confronted with stigmatization. The women who had migrated were well aware of the negative perceptions many hold about female migration and were determined to guard their honour during their time in bidesh. They anticipated that coming home ‘successful’ (i.e. with money) would reflect positively on their honour and stop people from speaking unfavourably about them.

Facing stigmatization turned out to be more challenging than expected – at least temporarily. When we first met the women in Malaysia, the situation was tense. At the time, defamatory stories about Bangladeshi women working in Malaysia were being published in Bangladeshi tabloids, highlighting Bangladeshi women’s alleged ‘immoral behaviour’ in Malaysia. These magazines were read not only in Bangladesh but also by the Bangladeshi community in Malaysia. The stories were generally written by Bangladeshi men who were working in Malaysia. The women feared these stories and had been confronted with them in one way or another: their good name, their ‘honour’, was at stake. Relatives at home wrote alarmed or angry letters questioning the social environment in Malaysia. We were oblivious of this situation when we first entered the Bangladeshi communities in Penang and Kedah, and we could not imagine the consequences it had in this initial period.

Most of the women were introduced to us through people they knew well. Many were welcoming and trusting and chose to participate in the survey. Others chose not to for reasons we did not probe into. Over time, several of these women sought us out and became open when we kept coming back to see them. We could feel a clear difference when we came to a home without having been introduced; at times, the situation was somewhat uncomfortable as the women feared that we wished to write defamatory stories about them. After all, the pseudo journalists had also seemed nice and genuinely interested (see the narrative in box 4.1). We respected these women’s decisions.

Although difficult in the beginning, the situation changed over time and we developed a relationship of trust with many of the women. Furthermore, the magazine scandal began to subside and no new articles appeared. The situation we encountered in the initial period reflected women’s sensitive position. Some felt it imperative
to refrain from any contact with outsiders and to present themselves in socioculturally correct ways. ‘These days it’s hard to trust anyone’ was a comment we often heard. Bangladeshi men, on the other hand, were generally willing or even eager to talk to us; they had no fear whatsoever of possible repercussions. However, the men sometimes represented themselves or their ‘reality’ in somewhat exaggerated ways in order to emphasize certain points, such as their disapproval of women’s migration or the adverse conditions at work.

The domain of work

While the Bangladeshi men were generally straightforward and open concerning cases of mistreatment and problems at the workplace, the women were often more cautious in disclosing such information. We asked the women whether they might get into trouble for receiving me as a visitor. They generally hushed these remarks, stating that it was fine and the company would not mind. As far as they were concerned, they simply did not talk about issues that were perceived to be potentially sensitive. The reasons for the stark difference in openness concerning working conditions between Bangladeshi men and women are discussed in more detail in Chapter 7. As far as methodology is concerned, however, it was important to be aware of these differences and to adjust our approach when necessary. The men sometimes exaggerated the unfair treatment they received and did not mind talking in the presence of other men. The women, on the other hand, were sometimes inclined to downplay adverse working conditions or treatment. They were also more comfortable during informal one-on-one conversations than in a group. In short, women were more inclined to understate their situations (cf. Mand 2006:1060).

The way people present themselves — what they choose to share and what not to divulge — is gender sensitive and may vary over time and space. There was a clear difference in the information about working conditions that they divulged while still in Malaysia and after their return. Some felt more comfortable relating cases of mistreatment after they had returned home. When relating certain incidents, a few said: ‘We couldn’t tell you then, because we were worried the management would find out.’ However, some women downplayed what they had earlier experienced as adverse; hardship had been forgotten. These post-migration rationalizations often seemed related to a continuing need or desire for well-paid overseas jobs and the wish to migrate once more. Many studies on female migration in Asia are conducted only among returned migrant women and often come to the conclusion that although women have faced hardship and abuse, they generally feel that the positive aspects outweigh the negative ones (cf. Chantavanich et al. 2001). Post-migration rationalizations may have featured here as well.

When visiting the women in their villages and neighbourhoods in Bangladesh, we also met women who had been working in different cities in Malaysia and had now returned home. By then, I was quite familiar with the situation of Bangladeshi women who had been to Malaysia and I could sense when stories were concealing certain aspects, that is, when there were gaps or inconsistencies. However, since I had not met these women in Malaysia, I could not gain the trust necessary for them
to confide in me, nor could I verify their stories or the information they provided. I therefore decided not to include these women’s experiences in this study. The findings of this study underline Sarah Mahler and Patricia Pessar’s (2001:455, 2006) argument that collecting data in the various locations that span people’s transnational contexts yields richer data than does collecting data in only the receiving or the sending communities.

In short, the impediments this study encountered were closely related to the structural and gendered confinements that migrant women experienced. It was found that many women gave explanations with surprisingly similar phrases in both the survey and during initial, informal encounters. Nencel (2001:121) talks in this respect about ‘grand narratives’; that is, plausible ‘lies’ that reflect what women know to be accepted factors that make the difference between being regarded as an honourable or a dishonourable woman. She argues:

Lying is a way of managing information. In most cases it is not meant to be a personal affront (...) Lying is a pragmatic decision. Telling the truth can ultimately be used against them and could have severe repercussion in their private lives. Lying serves to protect, to negate, to fantasize and to be accepted. (...) It is a means to sculpture one’s identity. (Ibid.)

Most of the ‘lies’ we were told by the migrant women were not falsifications but partial truths; in other words, they left out aspects that might be considered sensitive. The setbacks, silence and edited versions we encountered cannot be regarded as failures in terms of data collection: as Mand argues (2006:1060), narratives are not necessarily truly objective or coherent accounts, but means through which one can learn about people’s social context. The stories told provided valuable data as they revealed certain aspects of migrant women’s realities that otherwise would have remained unrevealed. Analysing situations of partial or ‘non-response’ helps to contextualize important aspects of respondents’ lives and situations (cf. see box 4.1). Thus silence, non-verbal behaviour, jokes and questions became increasingly understood over time.

The construction of knowledge is a multilayered process (cf. Nencel 1998:15). Fragmented and at times seemingly contradictory stories and remarks started to make sense during repeated encounters with various actors in Malaysia and Bangladesh. The women’s openness increased over time. This was especially the case when I returned to Malaysia a year later and visited them again: the women were impressed that I had not ‘forgotten’ them and as no more defamatory stories had appeared in magazines, there was a more relaxed atmosphere in the community.

The researchers’ social location

We, the researchers, also had a clear impact on the data collection: who we are, what we represent and how we were seen by our respondents influenced the process. Acknowledging that researchers’ subject positions are important is a clear departure from neo-positivist viewpoints, which assume that researchers can objectively
‘study’, judge and interpret the lives and meaning of research subjects and hence unproblematically uncover ‘facts’ and ‘truths’. Many contemporary ethnographic and feminist studies acknowledge that since everybody carries experiences and values that shape his or her vision and interpretations, research findings can hardly ever be entirely ‘objective’ or ‘value free’ (Wolf 1996:4). The researchers’ subject position, the questions asked and the answers expected, however unconsciously, interlace in the creation of ‘knowledge’. Since knowledge is thus situated, it is imperative to understand the researcher’s position vis-à-vis the research subjects and the way he or she is perceived by the latter – not only because of ethical considerations and issues of power, as forcefully argued in feminist epistemology, but also because the relationship between researcher and research subjects influences the data obtained (Patai 1991; Schrijvers 1991; Wolf 1996:14; Nencel 1996; Madge et al. 1997).

I speak no Bengali apart from a few simple phrases, but do speak a little Malay, the local language most women had become rather fluent in. I could therefore engage in small talk with Bangladeshi migrant women in a polyglot of Malay, English and a little Bengali. However valuable this was, it was not enough to hold in-depth conversations. I therefore worked with research assistants. My earlier research experience among Bangladeshi migrant men and Malay factory women in Penang in 1994 had been very different; workers felt secure and had been very open and willing to talk. I had not anticipated that I might be regarded with suspicion in the early stages of this study. I was ill prepared and had to learn how to adjust and become sensitive to this new situation. I had to be patient and go with the flow (qualities that are not necessarily my strongest).

Keeping an open mind and being genuinely interested in the lives of the migrants turned out to be pivotal. I had started the study with some preconceived ideas that were only slowly countered or uncovered. These preconceptions concerned women’s reasons for migration (for the family, I had assumed) and the institution of marriage (I had assumed that young women want to get married and earn money for dowries). Moreover, I found that I often, and largely unconsciously thought in dichotomies: ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ experiences, ‘gains’ versus ‘losses’, etc. However, through the encounters with the women and the discussions with my research assistants, I realized that this lens obscured many more of the subtle and contradicting aspects that make up women’s lived realities. I learned that self-reflexivity, openness and being humble are important attributes if one wishes to develop intimacy, trust and more egalitarian relationships (cf. Ong 1995).

At the start of my research, I was in my late twenties and unmarried. The women generally perceived me to be younger than that, and the fact that I was not married was accepted due to my ‘culture’ and my status as a student. However, my age and marital status influenced the way the women positioned themselves in relation to me (i.e. senior versus junior) and informed the selection of topics that were regarded as

---

10. Epistemologically, surveys generally continue to depart from this neo-positivist premise.
appropriate to discuss with me, an unmarried woman. The fact that I knew little of their language seemed to express to some a certain helplessness and naivety on my part. I was often perceived as interested and soft-hearted, but obviously still in need of learning about Bangladeshi culture—and many were willing to instruct me.

A researcher has to continuously examine his or her position of power, so as not to constrain research subjects to cooperate when they do not want to (Madge et al. 1997:108). After an unfortunate situation (see box 4.1), I had to reconsider whether the research might put the women in danger or perpetuate damaging stereotypes. I tried to be aware of my position of relative power; it was up to the women to decide whether they did or did not want to participate in the study. To research subjects, anybody who is more powerful than they are is potentially dangerous. Feminist researchers’ warnings concerning a researcher’s position of power vis-à-vis the research subjects are not misplaced (cf. Wolf 1996; Madge et al. 1997). However, it needs to be acknowledged that unequal positions of power do not mean that research subjects are powerless, as is sometimes suggested (Patai 1991; for a discussion see Wolf 1996). On the contrary, women often boldly asked what they would gain from the experience; whether they felt it was worth it or not often seemed related to whether they liked us and whether it might be fun or interesting to have a chat. If a woman did not want to cooperate, she would usually say so and that would be that. Moreover, during talks, women often ensured that the conversation would not go off in an uncomfortable direction. At times we were simply kept busy with small talk and eating. In other words, the women often decided the course our encounters would take and orchestrated it. Although we tried to steer the conversations, we learned that it was best to observe the situation and ‘go with the flow’ (cf. Nencel 1996). While feminist researchers sometimes acknowledge that research subjects may possess this power, it is frequently discarded as being the case only during micro processes of interpersonal dynamics, which does not change the fact that the researcher is a more powerful person within the global political arena (Wolf 1996:23, 36). Although the latter cannot be denied, it can also be argued that downplaying women’s agency with such comparisons is condescending.

In the context of one-to-one encounters in a field study, micro-level dynamics are of particular relevance and importance. The women were obviously very aware of the differences in power and social standing between us. I often felt, however, that to many women that was all that it was: an undeniable fact. Some decided to remain distant because of this power differential, while others felt it far more interesting to see what sort of women we were and what our intentions were, or to put it in their words ‘to see the quality of our hearts’. Their initial motives—curiosity and courtesy—could be transformed into respect and exchange. We experienced that despite our differences, it was possible to bond on certain shared subject positions. Although I

11. One time, for example, Fatima (a married woman), my Dutch research assistant Jenneke (who is ‘divorced’ and ‘senior’) and I were talking and laughing. The issue of sex and birth control came up. Jenneke was told not to translate for me as I was unmarried and did not know of such things—but to tell me later so I would be prepared in the future!
agree that the relative power of a researcher cannot be erased, I would caution against reasoning that is assumed to be politically correct yet is nonetheless ‘top-down’; that is, reasoning that may reflect researchers’ ideologies and agendas but that does not necessarily reflect the research subjects’ viewpoints.

**Box 4.1: Fieldwork experiences**

I had heard from a Bangladeshi contact that there were Bangladeshi women living in a nearby town. A large garment company producing for export employed about 250 Bangladeshis, of whom only 12 were women. All of the women had absconded from their previous employers due to contractual problems and had paid a lot of money to obtain visas and work permits for this factory.

We arrived in their residential area late one Sunday afternoon. A Bangladeshi woman was taking laundry down from the line on the veranda of one of the terraced houses. Hasina – my Bangladeshi research assistant – introduced us. The woman smiled in surprise. She called out to her housemates inside, and we were asked to enter their house. The main room was neat and sparsely furnished. We were greeted by six Bangladeshi women in their early twenties or thirties. They were surprised and curious about our unexpected visit. Shyness was mixed with initial circumspection. One woman, who introduced herself as Rokeya, invited us to sit down.

We sat in a circle on the floor and with the help of Hasina, I introduced ourselves and explained why we were there. One woman asked whether we were going to write ‘bad stories’ in the magazines. We assured her that we would not be doing so.

A casual conversation unfolded. Several women talked about their families and loved ones back home. Rokeya told us that her husband had left her. She had one daughter, who was about to finish her exams and graduate. Rokeya was worried about her: her skin colour is ‘black’ and it might be difficult to get her married. Other women added that Rokeya thinks and talks too much about her daughter and that she ‘spends way too much money on her’. Everybody laughed; the atmosphere was relaxed.

The women showed us their home. Twelve women shared the one-storey house. The bedrooms contained several bunk beds and were cramped. Yasmin, a widow in her early thirties, had had someone paint verses from the Koran on the grey walls of the small room she shared with Sabina. Plastic flowers and small coloured lights were draped around the bed. Meanwhile, Hasina was being asked about the latest news from Bangladesh. Rokeya touched my arm and said: ‘It is good that you came: your hearts are soft [compassionate].’ When we left, the goodbyes were warm and we were asked to return.

As agreed, we returned the following weekend. When we arrived, the house looked oddly empty. Yasmin, dressed in a beautiful sari, was sitting in a corner writing a letter home. She greeted us a little shyly and we chatted for a while. Hasina and I were wondering where everybody had gone. Suddenly, Yasmin straightened her back and said to Hasina: ‘I want you to tell me something. We told our [male] Bangladeshi colleagues that a Bangladeshi and a bideshi [foreign] woman had visited us. The men said that maybe you write those stories that are in the magazines. They said so many things. That’s why we’re all worried now. Apa [sister], if I tell you about me, will it be harmful for me?’ We were flabbergasted and tried to explain that we would not write defamatory stories.

The other women returned home. I was shocked to see the fear on their faces. The scene was so different from the week before. Appalled, I realized that I was responsible for their fear. How could I dispel it? I could not stop looking at Rokeya: her usually warm face looked terrified. I
told her that I was very sorry for making her fearful and that I did not want to ask any ques-
tions. Rokeya’s face softened. ‘You know, apa,’ she said quietly, ‘if you write, you may write
good things, yet they may be badly interpreted.’ I understood her.

The fact that I would not write for that type of magazine became irrelevant; I think they belie-
ved that we would not. But a sense of fear had been established and was likely to linger. I did
not want to prolong that in any way. Yasmin said: ‘There’re so many stories going around.
Some of the stories are true, others are not. We don’t like to get involved in these stories. (...)’

After finishing our contract we want to go home safely. You see how harsh the environment is
here, we don’t want to be harmed.’

We talked a little more and by the time we left, the atmosphere had loosened up. There was
even some laughter. The fear seemed to have diminished. Yet, I continued to wonder what
rumours would start once we had left. Would they anxiously wait for articles to appear? I
started to wonder what I was doing.

During the drive home, I felt an utter failure. I had naively hoped to contribute by writing
about these women’s lives and experiences. Now I realized that I was a potential threat. Alt-
ough these feelings lingered for some time, I knew that we had not done anything wrong.
Nevertheless, we became even more cautious. I slowly came to realize that the fear and with-
drawal were integral to the analysis of this study, as it poignantly revealed the women’s
situation.

Power should be examined as a multidimensional concept that contrasts greatly with
the unidimensional relations of power that are often assumed to exist between re-
searchers and research subjects (Nencel 1996:8). The fact that the women had little
power on some levels is not at variance with the fact that they actively and inventi-
vely employed power on other levels. While in some initial interviews I felt confron-
ted by the delicacy of the occasion and the responsibility I had as a researcher, sub-
sequent conversations with women who invited us to their homes revealed their
conviction that it would not harm their position. Some women said that it was im-
portant for someone to listen to them, so that others would know about the lives of
factory women. Some of the women in Bangladesh offered us assistance. In Dhaka,
two women helped us to locate their ex-colleagues and accompanied us on a few
trips. The research seemed to have become theirs as well. They stated: ‘We un-
derstand what you need to know, and we want to help.’

Research assistant’s subject positions

I worked with a different research assistant during each field period. I was joined
during the first extended field period in Malaysia by Hasina Ahmed, an experienced
Bangladeshi researcher associated with the University of Dhaka. She was in her late
forties and unmarried. On the following field trip to Malaysia, my research assistant
was Jenneke Arens a Dutch woman in her late forties. Jenneke is fluent in Bengali
and had worked and lived in Bangladesh at various times over a period of twenty-
five years. During the final fieldwork in Bangladesh, Farhana Syeda – a Bangladeshi
anthropologist/photographer in her late twenties – worked with me. Our team thus consisted of researchers with different subject positions.

Among anthropologists and feminist researchers, there has been much debate about the researcher as an ‘insider’ versus an ‘outsider’, and whether the former or the latter can conduct better or ethically more responsible research. Some claim that those who are of the same culture and ethnicity as the research subjects have an advantage in approaching research subjects and will come to more balanced views than will outsider researchers (for a full discussion, see Wolf 1996; Patai 1991). Others, however, have emphasized that native researchers can be outsiders as much as non-native researchers for reasons varying from class to education or their sociocultural embeddedness in the field (Ong, in Wolf 1996:17). Although we found that both statements can be true in particular situations, it is perhaps more constructive to focus on the quality of relations, that is, to shift the focus from dichotomies of outsider/insider to notions of intercultural perception and interaction. As Ong (in Wolf 1996:18) put it: ‘we have the capacity to re-inscribe ourselves in different cultural narratives’. Researchers and research subjects may discover communalities based on variables other than race, culture and class. Along these lines, we found that certain topics were more easily discussed with one person than with another. Although some differences relate to insider or outsider characteristics, we found that relative openness or reluctance did not simply occur along the lines of the insider/outsider axis; marital status and age were also influential. Moreover, at times a simple personal connection with a particular person seemed to make the difference.

In Malaysia, Hasina was perceived as a respectable older woman, and many felt safe and secure talking to her about their hopes, fears and home situations. Since I was younger, unmarried and a bideshi, young women were more open to me concerning the issue of potential husbands and dating. Things were again different with Jenneke, my Dutch research assistant who came to Malaysia the following year. In reply to the inevitable question regarding her marital status, Jenneke would say that she was divorced. She would often firmly add that she had no desire whatsoever to ever be with a man again. Many of the women would simply stare at her in bewilderment for a second, and then laugh, playfully slap her on the arm and exclaim that she was ‘so right!’. The no-nonsense, self-confident manner in which Jenneke presented herself on this subject evoked respect. Apart from the fact that she was from a different culture, her persona, marital status and the way she carried herself led to certain discussions and revelations that Hasina and I had not evoked earlier. Finally, during the fieldwork in Bangladesh, Farhana – a young, unmarried Bangladeshi woman – received much respect for her sensitivity and empathy; people easily opened up to her. Her demeanour and genuine interest in people’s lives seemed to bridge social distances that were based on different backgrounds and classes.

Another topic often discussed in feminist literature concerns the researcher’s self-representation. Some researchers have recorded their struggles over whether or not to conceal information about their marital status and background (Schrijvers 1993; Wolf 1996). It is argued (Wolf 1996) that being truthful about certain aspects of one’s personal life – and particularly about one’s marital status – may be disapproved of by research subjects, which in turn can harm the study. This issue is an ethical
one. I had decided not to conceal my marital status, and left it up to my assistant researchers to decide how they would represent themselves. The ardent and determined view of Hasina was particularly inspiring: unmarried and in her late forties, her decision not to conceal her marital status was political. She contended that if women continue to conceal their marital status, people, especially in villages, would never get to accept and respect the reality of many unmarried and divorced women. For Jenneke, Farhana and me, choosing to be candid about our marital status was probably a far easier decision: people accepted that we were from a different culture or assumed that we would marry in the near future. Hasina was occasionally provoked and insulted and was repeatedly asked ‘why’ or ‘how come’ she had no husband. Nevertheless, she felt that it had been an appropriate decision, and I agreed with her. We ultimately benefited from the increased intimacy and openness it created between the women and us.

One particular incident drove home the importance of self-presentation and openness. Many women expected that I would marry after completing my studies. Whenever someone asked me more specific questions, I explained that I had recently broken up with my boyfriend. This fact – that I had had a boyfriend – was generally accepted; it was my culture, the women would say. That was fine – as long as the next boyfriend would marry me. These discussions not uncommonly evoked remarks about the relative freedom we bideshi women had compared to Bangladeshi women. When not specifically asked, it would not always occur to me to elaborate further on my personal situation. However, the meaning and connotations that some women ascribed to our perceived presentations as single women had far reaching consequences that I was initially unaware of. Some understood it as a moral statement, a presentation on our part as being ‘good’, chaste women and all the associations that come with it. To a number of women, however, this was threatening: they feared that we might be judgemental about them or their behaviour. Hence, they were cautious, as the following incident shows.

After Hasina and I had spent the evening at a women’s hostel, several women came with us to the car. I walked next to Farida, a divorced woman of my age. We were chatting and I suddenly remembered that I had met her ‘cousin brother’ the other day. I told her that I had liked him. Her demeanour immediately changed. She looked at me and smiled uneasily. She was uncomfortable with what I considered to be an innocent remark. She pointed at her friend, Rahana, and exclaimed:

---

12. A year later, I was on holiday with my boyfriend in Malaysia and we visited some of the women. He was asked if he was going to marry me. Whether I wanted to marry him was obviously not deemed interesting. Yet, their question was invoked by concern. They wanted to make sure that the person I was with was honourable and would not simply abandon me; a concern that many women had.

13. In Bangladeshi culture it is common to call someone ‘cousin brother’ or ‘cousin sister’ if one is not related but has a similar relation as one would have with a brother or sister. Essentially, this is a means to overcome strict rules of gender segregation between unrelated men and women. In the current context it was used to underline that this young man helped Farida like a cousin brother would with errands for which she needed assistance. The relation was entirely platonic.
‘He’s her fiancé – not mine!’ Rahana in turn looked at me with an anxious expression. I was alarmed: my words had been misinterpreted.

I walked over to Rahana and told her that I had genuinely liked the man and was happy that she would soon be marrying him. After a few moments, she became more relaxed. However, it was not those words that had eased her suspicion, but the words I had added in a desperate whisper: ‘Having a relation is fine with me; I had one myself!’ She looked at me in sudden surprise: ‘A boyfriend – you?’ I said ‘Of course’, and a massive smile crossed her face. She walked over to Farida and whispered excitedly. I was baffled. Our exchange had completely changed these women’s perception of me and, ultimately, strengthened their feeling of trust and safety in relation to me.

It had not occurred to me that by not explicitly stating that I had been involved with a man before, I could be interpreted as presenting myself as a ‘chaste woman’. Rahana and Farida dispelled my ignorance and made me aware of and more sensitive to the subtleties of marital status in this particular sociocultural context. Being an outsider, I had overlooked the fact that having been involved with someone was not self-evident, not even for a bideshi; it was a charged issue. Once this had become clear, it became much easier for the young women to trust me.

Being perceptive, open and unbiased to particular outcomes remained an important challenge that I often needed to remind myself of. More than once I arrived somewhere with a bunch of burning questions in my mind but did not get the chance to ask them all; something had come up or happened, and that was the talk of the day. At times, I found myself impatient, as I thought that some of it was not ‘relevant’, while I attempted to understand other aspects. Yet I was often gently reminded by the course of events that these issues were far more crucial than I had initially thought.

We tried to have open minds, so that we would hear not only the stories but also the cut-off stories and the silences with their underlying meanings. However, we did not always manage to see things for what they really were, as Shannaz, one of the returned migrant women, gently pointed out to us. Farhana and I had visited Shannaz several times in her village in Bangladesh. Upon her return two months earlier, she had married Youssouf, a Bangladeshi man she had met in Malaysia. They were perfectly happy – or so we thought. The fact that many women had not found themselves in situations as fortunate as they (and we) had hoped to be in, had apparently made us eager to find a ‘happy story’. That was Shannaz, until one day she said: ‘You think I’m happy, but you don’t see what else is going on.’ It humbled us once again, and made us realize how quickly one sees what one wants to see. In the process, we became aware, as Naila Kabeer (2000:400) put it, of how ‘easy it is to fall...

14. When someone in a particular situation softly advised me to contact certain women via their male colleagues, I did not take the advice and was ultimately reprimanded by the women for not having contacted them via the men, the ones whom they trusted. I had been culturally insensitive in this particular case. Confusingly, however, in other cases, going via men would have raised more suspicion as they had caused them trouble in the past and were not trusted. A culturally gendered sensitivity was required, and needed to be contextualized for each individual situation.
into the trap of “hearing” those voices which confirm one’s own favoured interpretations and discounting those which do not’. While we may not have always succeeded, we attempted to listen with an open mind.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter highlighted both the epistemological and the methodological decisions that were taken during the fieldwork. We used a survey to obtain quantifiable data regarding gendered migration. However, this study underlines the need for additional and extensive qualitative data from both the receiving and the sending countries. Our fieldwork experiences serve to underline the differences between male and female respondents’ gendered positions and their responses to the researchers. These pose methodological challenges and demand gender sensitive methods. While quantitative research approaches can gather valuable information, they often fail to contextualize the data and thus cannot redress gender-linked biases. Qualitative research methods pay attention to the perspectives and understanding of research subjects’ actions and beliefs. Such methods are more flexible and adaptable to changing research conditions and evolving research questions. Their empirical orientation encourages the incorporation of newly discovered relevant variables, a suppleness that is much more difficult to accomplish when relying on quantitative research methods only (Mahler & Pessar 2006:31).

In the course of time, it became clear that the Bangladeshi women’s experiences of their migrations were particularly sensitive. While all researchers must consider their research subjects’ representations of themselves, this is of even greater significance in situations where gender boundaries are stretched or redefined. I ‘unlearned’ the more formal ways of conducting research I had been trained in, as these often proved to be unsatisfactory or insufficient. Horst (2003:29 citing Hyndman 2001) rightly comments that building trust may in the first place be related to the researcher’s willingness to leave some stones unturned and to learn not to pry when this is not wanted. Research subjects sense the difference between genuine interest and prying for reasons of self-interest, and they respond accordingly. Over the course of time, our repeated visits and evident interest improved and strengthened our relationships with the women and men who so trustingly shared part of their lives with us.

The following chapters are based on the stories and experiences of the Bangladeshi women and men we met in Malaysia and Bangladesh.
CHAPTER 5: WHY MIGRATE?

The focus in this chapter is on why women decide to migrate. It starts with a discussion of the socio-economic backgrounds of the female migrants who took part in our survey, and moves on to a discussion of women’s migration incentives. In a subsequent section, the survey results are supplemented by qualitative data. In order to put women’s migration incentives into perspective, the final section addresses their socio-economic situations and motivations for migration as compared to Bangladeshi men who worked in the same factories or lived in the same neighbourhoods in Malaysia.

5.1 Bangladeshi female migrants: socio-economic characteristics

The majority (63%), 88 of the 139 Bangladeshi women surveyed had arrived in Malaysia in 1996; 36 (26%) had arrived in 1995 and 16 (11%) in 1993. On average, they had been in Malaysia for 43 months. Half of the women originate from the rural areas surrounding Dhaka, namely Gazipur (27%), Naranganj (13%) and Narshandi (10%). Smaller percentages originate from several adjacent districts, while 13% originate from Dhaka itself. Three of the women are Hindus; the others are Muslims. Most of the women were in their early twenties; their average age was 22 at the time of migration. As table 5.1 shows, 24% of the women were younger than 18 when they first arrived in Malaysia. Some (3) were as young as 14.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age upon arrival in Malaysia</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14-17 years</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-22 years</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23-27 years</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28-32 years</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33-37 years</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eighteen is the legal minimum age for migration, and almost a quarter of the women had claimed that they were older in order to obtain passports. Since few people possess birth certificates in Bangladesh, exact age is hard to prove and a passport based on a false age can be obtained quite easily. On a few occasions we had to guess a woman’s age with her help, as she answered the question ambivalently.
Table 5.2: Marital status and average age upon arrival in Malaysia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Average age:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>on arrival</td>
<td>at time of interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.2 shows that the largest group of women (46%) were unmarried before they came to Malaysia. Adding divorced (22%) and widowed (7%) women, 75% of all the women had no conjugal partner.\(^1\) Of the women, 26% were married; 54% (75) had been married or were still married. On average, they had 1.4 children. It should also be noted that 57% of all the divorced women were childless (see table 5.3).

Married women were the oldest (26 on average) at the time of arrival, and unmarried women were the youngest (18 on average).

Table 5.3: Number of children among the Bangladeshi migrant women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of children</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Divorced</th>
<th>Widowed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>6 (17%)</td>
<td>17 (57%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4 (11%)</td>
<td>7 (23%)</td>
<td>4 (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>17 (48%)</td>
<td>3 (10%)</td>
<td>2 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>7 (19%)</td>
<td>2 (7%)</td>
<td>3 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
<td>36 (100%)</td>
<td>30 (100%)</td>
<td>9 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Almost one third of the women were illiterate; they had never gone to school (see table 5.4). At 68%, literacy rates among the women in this study are far higher than the average in Bangladesh, which for the 15-24 age category is 49% (World Bank 2003a). Many companies in Malaysia, particularly those in the electronics sector, select migrant workers on the basis of literacy and basic maths skills, which led to higher literacy rates among the Bangladeshi women in this study. The average percentage of women who had finished high school or even higher education was 22%. Some had started intermediate level (i.e. college), but only a few had finished it.

A significant difference regarding schooling was discerned: while 53% of the married women had never gone to school, the figure for the unmarried women is 22% (see table 5.4). This discrepancy may be related to the tendency for illiterate

---

1. A woman was considered separated or divorced if she said she was or she had not been living with her husband prior to her migration and was not sending money to him.
women or women with lower educational levels to marry at a younger age than educated women (Shaikh 1997; Yadava & Hossain 2000).

**Table 5.4: Years of schooling among the Bangladeshi migrant women**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All women</th>
<th>Unmarried</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Divorced</th>
<th>Widowed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No schooling</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>class 1-3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>class 4-6</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>class 7-9</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>class 10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSC *</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSC **</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average no. of</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>years of school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* SSC: secondary school certificate, given out after passing an exam at the end of high school in class 10.
** HSC: higher secondary certificate, post-high school secondary schooling (i.e. vocational training institutes/polytechnic institutes, pre-university).

Moreover, the age difference between unmarried and married women was as much as nine years. As school enrolment for girls has increased significantly over the past decades, this aspect may contribute to the difference observed in education between married and unmarried women (Arends-Kuenning & Amin 2000:2). Unmarried women scored highest in terms of higher education: 16% had received a secondary school certificate or higher as compared to 11% of the married, divorced and widowed women.

Most of the women (n=91, 66%) did not have a paid job before leaving Bangladesh (see table 5.5). Of the 48 women who had worked prior to their migration, 30 (63% of those with previous employment) had worked in a factory in Bangladesh, predominantly in the garment industry. Six per cent (8) of the women had worked abroad before; they had been employed in factories in the Middle East during the early 1990s. The category ‘other’ (7% of the total) encompasses jobs that generally had a higher social standing and salary, such as teachers, tutors and NGO workers. Looking at employment by marital status, another difference emerges: a minority of the unmarried women (20%) and the married women (33%) had paid jobs before their migration, as compared to a majority of the divorced women (57%) and the widowed (67%) women.
Table 5.5: Jobs prior to migration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>All the women</th>
<th>Percentage of all the women</th>
<th>Unmarried</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Divorced</th>
<th>Widowed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No job</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>51 (80%)</td>
<td>24 (67%)</td>
<td>13 (43%)</td>
<td>3 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory employment in Bangladesh*</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>10 (16%)</td>
<td>8 (22%)</td>
<td>10 (33%)</td>
<td>2 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed in factory abroad</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
<td>2 (6%)</td>
<td>3 (10%)</td>
<td>2 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
<td>2 (6%)</td>
<td>4 (13%)</td>
<td>2 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>64 (100%)</td>
<td>36 (100%)</td>
<td>30 (100%)</td>
<td>9 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Predominantly in the garment industry

The vast majority of the unmarried women had lived with their parents before migrating. The majority of the married women (53%) had lived in nuclear families and 28% with their in-laws. Most of the separated women had lived in their parental home (83%), as had most of the widowed women (67%).

The average household size was 7 individuals, and the average number of persons earning an income, including the respondent who had migrated, was 2.5 per household. A relatively large proportion (60%) of respondents’ households owned land; 30% did not. For the remaining 10%, the amount of land owned, if any, was unclear. Many of the women did not know the exact amount of land. Most women considered the amount to be small and said that the rice grown on it was for their own consumption only. Some (9%) came from households that owned a large amount of land; in this context, it was often remarked that most of the harvest was sold at the local market. The ownership of land, however small the plot may be, indicates that although many of the women’s households faced economic hardship, they did not belong to the poorest segment of Bangladeshi society.

5.2 Why did the women migrate?

Of the women who participated in the survey, 45% stated that it had been their idea and personal desire to migrate (see table 5.6), and that they had persuaded their guardians to grant the necessary consent; 48% said it had been a collective decision, either within the household or with the assistance of relatives. Several of the women

---

2. In other instances, women did know the exact amount of land. However, the metric system differed not only in each district but also in different areas within the same district. Referring to a certain amount of land as a few bigha or paki could mean different things in different places. Since many women were unsure as to the measurements of their households’ land, it was decided to leave the sizes out.
added that ‘it hardly could be any different’, as it is not possible to leave without the
consent of the family. The remaining 7% stated that they were persuaded or simply
told or requested to migrate by their families or relatives; these women had had little
say in the matter. The results suggest that for the majority of women, migrating had
been an active choice. This finding is in line with other studies on the migration of
Asian women (e.g. Tacoli 1999; Siddiqui 2001; Barber 2000; Asis 2001; Constable
2003). Whether this decision to migrate was informed by internalized feelings of
responsibility, duty and sacrifice, or was inspired (or also inspired) by personal
goals and self-interest (see Chapter 2) is explored in the subsequent sections of this
chapter.

Table 5.6: Decision making regarding migration: impact of marital status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persons making the decision:</th>
<th>Unmarried</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Divorced</th>
<th>Widowed</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The woman herself</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>44.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Father, brother and/or hus-
band                           | 5         | 3       | 2        | -       | 10    |
|                              | 8%        | 8%      | 7%       | 0       | 7.2%  |
| Family members, or relatives
and the woman together        | 36        | 22      | 8        | 1       | 67    |
|                              | 55%       | 61%     | 26%      | 11%     | 48%   |
| Total                        | 64        | 36      | 30       | 9       | 139   |
|                              | 100%      | 100%    | 100%     | 100%    | 100%  |

Importantly, the migration of many women was influenced and inspired by ‘grape-
vine’ stories. Two thirds of the women with whom we had talked in depth had been
inspired to migrate by grapevine stories. The grapevine can be defined as the hearsay
and the information about migration that reach people via such actors as relatives,
neighbours, vendors, agents and the media. It includes gossip, exaggerations and
false facts, as well as accurate information. Many of those who had returned repre-
sented their experiences in a favourable light. Stories frequently become exaggera-
ted in increasingly fantastic forms as they travel through the grapevine (cf. Gardner
1993:10).

Most women in this study had heard only general stories about female migrants,
highlighting the message that these days ‘many’ women are going to bidesh. Some
personally knew women who had migrated. When combined with the grapevine
stories of success and prestige that surrounds the emigration of men, this informa-
tion inspired many to follow suit. The story of Rahana, an unmarried woman, is
illustrative. She lived in a village in Mymensingh, a district about half a day’s
travel from Dhaka:

No-one had migrated from our locality. My uncle used to tell us about women
working in Dhaka, and my brother used to read the papers to us. I also listened to
the radio. That’s how we knew. But there is no-one in bidesh from our village.
Later, some girls from our locality started to work in garment factories. We heard
from them that many girls worked in garment factories in Dhaka. The girls would speak, and we would listen. They told us that women were also going to work in factories in bidesh. They said that if we got a higher salary we could go abroad, but with the salary we receive we can hardly survive. I then said to myself, since my parents have some money I could go abroad. I would convince my parents, I thought. And because I convinced them, I am here.

Upon her marriage, Rokeya had left her village to join her husband’s family. Rokeya:

When I got divorced and I came back from my husband’s house, I found that so many men and women in my village were going to bidesh and they were improving their condition. I wanted to improve my life too. And besides, I needed to look after my son. (...) Through that thinking, I came to bidesh.

It was often felt that ‘what they can do, I can do too’. New opportunities had arisen, and for various reasons, they were taken. The demonstration effect ruled (see also Siddiqui 2001:47). In combination with the efforts of recruiting agents to attract women, the migration barrier became substantially lower. What was once the domain of men has been opened up to women.

Table 5.7: Primary motivation for migration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Unmarried</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Divorced</th>
<th>Widowed</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Economic Reasons</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acute economic need</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudden economic need</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No urgency</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Reasons</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be more independent</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get away</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Two married women had migrated to join their husbands abroad. They had had no choice in the matter: they had been commanded to migrate. One unmarried woman said that there had been no specific reason for her migration, at least none that she felt like sharing.
Why had the Bangladeshi women wanted to migrate? A total of 91 women (66%) stated that they had migrated to improve their households’ economic condition, while 32% said that they had migrated for personal reasons, fuelled by the desire to be more independent and to escape from undesirable situations at home (see table 5.7). To provide a more thorough understanding, the ‘why’ question is discussed in greater detail by first taking a closer look at the survey results, followed by a discussion based on the qualitative data of the women’s choices.

It is argued that economic incentives are inherently socioculturally embedded and should thus be analysed together. For analytical purposes and reasons of clarity, the discussion is organized around a single variable, namely marital status. Although it is acknowledged that this is only one of women’s identities, marital status proves to have played an important role in women’s motivations and experiences in the migration process.

5.3 Economic motivations

Many women’s motives for migration are economic and hence closely related to the socio-economic conditions in Bangladesh (Chapter 3). Relative deprivation, high unemployment rates and limited job prospects largely influenced most women who migrated to further their earnings. Many women wanted to contribute to the income of the extended household but felt that there were no suitable options available to them in Bangladesh. The households of the economically motivated women can be subdivided into three socio-economic groups: those with acute economic needs; those experiencing sudden economic setbacks or specific economic needs related to the children’s future; and those who had stable income sources that secured their well-being and who faced no immediate or pressing economic need.

a) Acute economic situation

Of the women, 54 (39% of the total and 59% of the economically motivated), of whom 32 were unmarried (55%), came from households that were facing pressing economic difficulties. Half of the unmarried women’s households owned land on which rice was grown for their own consumption; 80% of the unmarried women in this group were the eldest of a number of siblings living at home. Several women had older sisters who had been married before. There were generally no elder or working brothers. In 36% of the households, the father had either died or was no longer economically active; of the fathers who were working, most cultivated land, owned small shops or businesses, or worked in factories or as labourers. Their levels of income were low and sometimes uncertain. The respondent’s contribution was hence of importance to the extended household. The educational levels of the unmarried respondents in this group were lower than the average for unmarried
women. Many women expressed feelings of responsibility for the well-being of their parents and siblings, and stated that they had come to help their fathers since there were no elder brothers available.

Ten of the married women had migrated for similar reasons. Half of them lived in nuclear families and half in extended families. Their husbands generally worked as land cultivators, factory workers or small businessmen with modest revenues and little, if any, land. The lower migration fee for women as compared to men had also played a role in the decision leading to the women’s migrations. Four of the women had husbands who were elderly and their incomes fluctuated; two of these women stated that at times there was a shortage of food. The divorced (9) and widowed (3) women had been living at their parents’ homes before they migrated. Fathers were generally too old to work and there were often no brothers providing for the household. Prior to their migration, most of these women had held jobs, primarily in the garment industry. These women felt that the children and younger siblings needed to be looked after and that caring for their daughters or sisters also meant saving for their dowries.

b) Sudden economic setbacks and specific needs

The second subgroup consists of 24 women (17% of the total and 26% of the economically motivated) with special economic needs. Of these women, 21 had migrated for reasons related to economic setbacks (in societies where there is no social security system, sudden events may compel women to take jobs; see also Kabeer 2000). These women came from households whose socio-economic position had been better than that of the first group; however, the financial situation of the household had suddenly deteriorated. For nine of the unmarried women, the households had some land that produced rice partly for own consumption and partly for the market. Dowry payments and slow-downs in business had worsened the financial situation of these households. The educational levels of the respondents and siblings were similar to the average for all unmarried women. In four of the households of the unmarried women, the father had recently died, and in two other households he had become severely ill, which left the household without a regular income. Uncles and grandfathers had to provide these families with financial support. The three remaining households of the unmarried women had suffered from recently accumulated debts.

Among the married women, three of the eight had suddenly incurred greater debts; two due to hospital bills for themselves or their children, and one due to additional dowry demands by her in-laws. For these three women, feelings of responsibility and shame were at the core of their decision to migrate. Five married, four widowed and three divorced women primarily migrated ‘to earn for a better future

---

4. 30% were illiterate, as compared to an average of 21% for unmarried women.
5. One family due to business failure, another due to being cheated by a recruitment agent while in the process of sending a son abroad, and the third after having married off six daughters.
for their teenage children’ or to pay for their education and dowries. Their household incomes were generally stable but modest, and their husbands had small businesses or small plots of land. Two of the widows had held well-paying jobs in Bangladesh, one as a market researcher and the other as an NGO worker. The two other widows worked in the garment industry, as did three of the divorced women. For the widowed and the divorced women, losing their husbands – the households’ main earners – presented an unexpected loss. Providing for their future and for that of their children became a daunting task if they could depend only on income from their jobs in Bangladesh.

c) No urgency

In the third subgroup, 13 women (9% of the total and 14% of the economically motivated) faced no economic urgency. Nine of the unmarried women came from families whose economic situation was stable. All these households owned land (in four cases, large amounts of land) and thrived on the revenues. The respondents’ fathers and brothers were mainly cultivators, weavers or carpenters; there were generally two or more breadwinners (excluding the respondent). Economic urgencies such as debts and dowries were not mentioned. These respondents had a higher level of education. Although these women did not have sudden or severe economic needs, they still considered the ‘need to earn for the family’ their main reason for migrating. Four of the married women belonged to this group. Two husbands were mechanics, another had a small business in tyres and one was a homeopathic doctor. They all owned land. These women stated that they had left to further improve their standard of living, using their money to modernize or extend their houses. Migration was a means of achieving socio-economic mobility.

5.4 Personal motivations for migration

Of all of the women, 45 (32%) stated that they migrated primarily for reasons of a more personal nature. Although economic reasons had played a role, these women stated that migration had also helped them to attain their future goals, allowing them to do something for themselves. Some had hoped to become more independent, while others wanted to get away from their current family situation, due to friction with their husband or other family members, and emotional pain or abuse.

a) To be more independent

Thirty women stated that they had migrated in order to become more independent. Of the 11 unmarried women in this group, 9 came from households where the economic situation seemed stable. They owned land, part of the harvest was sold, and many of their fathers and brothers were engaged in some sort of business. The socio-economic condition of many of the women was the same as that of the women in the ‘no urgency’ category of the economically inclined group discussed above. The
other two unmarried women came from families with modest economic backgrounds. All eleven women had at least gone through to class 10. Most of them would have liked to continue their studies, but their parents had stopped their education for financial reasons or for reasons related to expected gender roles. However, they held on to their ambitions. They wanted to work and to ‘establish themselves’ but had few job prospects given their educational level. The jobs available in garment factories were not desirable because of the low salaries, adverse working conditions and the low status associated with them. Migration was thought to offer the best alternative.

The five married women sought economic independence because their relationships with their husbands had become strained. The 12 divorced women who migrated primarily to become economically independent of their relatives had hoped to expand their future life-choices. Half of them had held jobs in the garment industry; five came from households with a modest income, while seven came from households that were relatively well-off, with land and/or thriving businesses. The two widowed women came from similar backgrounds. The widows and some of the divorced women had migrated not only to be more independent but also to escape their parents’ pressure to remarry.

b) Getting away

This group comprised 15 women. The economic situation of these households was generally modest but stable. Brothers or fathers had low yet regular incomes, mainly from farming small plots of land. Two unmarried women migrated to escape unpleasant situations at home resulting from the divorce and subsequent remarriage of their parents. Seven married women had left to ‘get away from it all’; three recalled having difficulties living with their in-laws and four had severe marital problems, ranging from infidelity and polygamous husbands, to abuse. Six divorced women who lived with their relatives had left because of tension within their families: household members, often brothers or sisters-in-law, resented the divorcee for living off their income. The desire to get away from these situations combined with the possibility to enhance their future situations had led them to migrate.

In short, the findings of the survey indicate that about two thirds of the women had migrated to help their families economically: for 56% this was due to economic necessity, while almost a third (32%) indicated that their migration had also been driven by the desire to do something for themselves. This general trend accords with the findings of Tasneem Siddiqui, who conducted a survey study among 200 returned migrant women in Bangladesh (IOM/INSTRAW 2000; Siddiqui 2001). Both surveys indicate that although economic reasons predominate, social factors also play an important role.

In the course of the study, the complexity of the interaction of economic and social incentives became even more evident. Although explanations for migration were collected in the survey, different layers of explanations were gradually revealed through the in-depth interviews and the repeated informal meetings and discussions with women in both Malaysia and Bangladesh. New information sometimes
lent a different perspective to women’s transnational moves, and new motives were discerned. Economic motivations, however real and necessary, were often found to be mixed with other incentives. Many women did not mention these additional reasons during the survey, as they were regarded as socioculturally sensitive issues. Women’s jobs and migration are not entirely socially accepted and can create controversy. The reasons most readily given were generally in accordance with the community’s values and social norms (i.e. both economic and ‘dutiful’ reasons), thereby emphasizing the socially desired image of appropriate behaviour for women. Cloaking migration intentions under the umbrella of ‘doing it for the household’ was safe and thus often became the ‘official’ version of the women’s motivations to migrate, even when other factors had also played a crucial role.

In an interesting study on gender migration from the Dominican Republic to the United States, Grasmuck and Pessar (1991:147) reached a similar conclusion. They found that women often concealed their personal motives for migration, giving the accepted answer of ‘household economic maximization’ as their guiding principal. It was found, however, that the migration of women was partly a conscious escape from their economic dependence on men. The authors rightly argue that at best it is simplistic, and at worst empirically incorrect to assume that migration is solely or primarily motivated by the economic goals of the household. It is easy to come to such conclusions since migrant women and their families publicly proclaim that their migration is motivated by the collective household goals. Effectively, the women stressed that although they were stretching gender boundaries by migrating on their own, they did not overstep them. In the following discussion, a closer look is taken at the additional reasons given in informal conversations. The women frequently introduced this topic with the words: ‘Actually, I came because (…)’.

5.5 Socioculturally embeddedness of economic incentives

The argument provided here is not intended to mitigate the importance of economic motivations; poverty was an unmistakably crucial reason for women to migrate. However, experiences of poverty are gendered and partially socially constructed. A deeper understanding of women’s migrations can be acquired by focusing on the relationships between sociocultural and economic factors. As Bourdieu (2005:1) stresses, any economically induced practice remains a ‘total social fact’. As the following illustrates, the limitations imposed by the culturally desired roles of women fuelled many of their economic goals. The sociocultural embeddedness of the economic incentives can be assessed by taking a closer look at the women’s individual social locations and their personal and contextualized motivations.
Unmarried women

A total of 18 unmarried women were informally interviewed on several occasions in both Malaysia and Bangladesh. The sense of responsibility felt by many of the unmarried women towards their family cannot be underestimated. They had migrated to improve the lives of their parents, sisters and brothers and to pay for their education or dowries, or as some stated: ‘So that at least they will be happily married.’ Similarly, Siddiqui (2000:45) found in her study among migrant women that it seemed increasingly common for unmarried or separated women to sacrifice their chance of marriage or remarriage in order to migrate and earn money to put towards a dowry for younger sisters. Ruzina’s (22) story illustrates this succinctly. She had three older married sisters and three younger unmarried sisters. She recalls:

For three years I tried to persuade my father to let me go [to Malaysia]. He’d tried to get me married, but he’d failed. I have no older brother. I see my father working so hard to maintain our family. So I decided to go to bidesh. At least through my work I can give my other sisters a happy marriage.

Ruzina’s migration was induced by feelings of responsibility for, pain about and the hopelessness of the family situation. In the year she migrated, her only brother Abdul (21) also migrated to Malaysia, a decision that had been made for similar reasons. While the father had been reluctant to let Ruzina go, he had expected Abdul to migrate for the benefit of the family. The organization of the marriage institution and gender expectations had imposed a burden on both the sister and the brother.

However, there was another side to the women’s stories. Most of the unmarried women had wanted to migrate in order to improve their own marriage prospects and future. Doing something for their families was not regarded as being at odds with simultaneously doing something for themselves. Many appeared to have clear ideas about what they desired and took strategic action to achieve their goals. The stories of Fatima and Tasnema are illustrative in this context. They were 20 and 17 years old when they came to Malaysia. Fatima:

I came to Malaysia to solve our family problems. I have to look after the education of my younger sister. My parents did not ask me to do so, but I had to shoulder this responsibility. My elder brother and elder sister got married. I have a younger sister and parents, too, for whom I had to work in the garment factory. I was in Dhaka then. Later on I saw that Bengali women were going abroad to earn money, and since I needed money, I thought, ‘Why not go abroad?’ Of course, since I am unmarried my parents had their hesitations in the beginning. My bro-

6. An additional five women had presented themselves as ‘unmarried’; it was only in Bangladesh that it became clear that these women were actually divorced but had chosen to present themselves differently.
ther-in-law was also against it. He wanted to get me married. I did not want to. I told them that after improving my position by earning money, I would think of marriage.

Tasnema:

I am here because of the financial crisis we faced at home. My father died when I was a child. I have one sister. My maternal uncle always helped us. We are very poor. We used to live with the help of others. My mother needs money for living, for my sister’s school expenses and in case she wants to arrange our marriages. (...) Many women are going to bidesh these days. Seeing them go, I thought: I can do that, too. I will be able to earn some money. Then I will be able to get a good husband. Nowadays, no marriage can be arranged without money. Let’s see how it all works out.

Both women came from poor families (group a in the survey). Seeing others take factory jobs or migrating had inspired them to do likewise. Fatima and Tasnema wanted to help their families economically. However, theirs were not simple sacrificial decisions.

Taking people seriously as agents means taking their relationships and commitments to other people into serious consideration. Peter (2003:2), drawing on Amartya Sen (1986:232), argues that as a result of the complex interdependencies that operate in a society and tie peoples’ lives together, and of the worth and value that people ascribe to these relationships, it is never entirely possible to analytically isolate people from the influence of their environment. Consequently, categorizing decisions and actions as either personal or extra-personal can be problematic, as they often partially overlap. Women like Fatima and Tasnema aimed to better their own futures and strategized towards this end.

It later became clear that marriage had played a role for all the unmarried women. To understand the ways marriage related to their migration, it is instructive to take a closer look at the institution at large. It is not a viable or desired alternative to remain single, as seen in Chapter 3. It is through marriage and motherhood that an adult Bangladeshi woman derives social status. Single women may jeopardize their families’ reputation and honour if they are seen with men who are not their relatives. In Bangladesh, a family’s honour is perceived to be a reflection of the moral behaviour of their kin’s women. Moreover, remaining single may render a woman economically and socially vulnerable. A woman without a husband, without a guardian, is frequently depicted as sexually loose, and this makes her vulnerable to abuse. It is thus not surprising that many women want to marry eventually (Ahmed & Nahar 1987:187; Rozario 1992:151, 1998:265; Islam & Mahmud 1996:28; Kabeer 2000:187).

Child marriages are still common, especially in the countryside. Many parents try to marry off their daughters while they are still young, in order to safeguard the girls’ honour. Furthermore, dowry demands often increase with a woman’s age. In 1961, the government introduced a fixed minimum age for marriage, namely 16 for fema-
les and 21 for males. In 1984, the Muslim Family Law Ordinance (which prohibits child marriage) raised the minimum age of marriage to 18 years for women. However, in rural areas the child marriage act has little effect; according to some, it merely encourages misreporting on marriage documents (Yadava & Hossain 2000:320; Arends-Kuenning & Amin 2000). Information on the age of marriage is relatively scarce (Shaikh 1997:46). Studies have come up with an average age of marriage for females that ranges from 14 to 19 years. Nevertheless, the average age of marriage for girls seems to have increased over the past decades (Huq, Najmul & Cleland 1990; Yadava & Hossain 2000). Education is found to be one of the most significant factors in explaining variability of age at first marriage. Generally speaking, teenage marriages are more common in rural areas and among illiterate women and illiterate men.

Although the legal age for marriage has been increased, approximately 50% of all females still marry before they reach the stipulated age of 18 (Yadava & Hossain 2000:322). Men’s age at marriage has always been higher and has risen in recent times. They generally do not marry before their twenties; it is rather common for them to marry in their late twenties or early thirties. Consequently, there is often a significant age difference between husbands and wives.

The unmarried women in this study – who on average were 18 when they first arrived in Malaysia – were thus at an age at which the topic of marriage was very likely to be an issue. Their higher educational attainment (56% had secondary school education) played a role in delaying their marriage. They were generally not regarded as being ‘too old’ for marriage. For several women, however, marriage had become a pressing issue. Their parents were concerned and wanted to see their daughters married. Often, preliminary negotiations regarding potential marriages had taken place before their migration.

Most marriages are arranged marriages. Negotiations that precede a marriage are often tedious and complex. During the 1960s and 1970s, a shift took place from the

---

7. Yadava and Hossain (2000), like several other scholars, based their study on data collected via the Demographic Surveillance System of the International Center for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR,B) in Matlab Thana in Comilla, which is a relatively impoverished rural area. It was found that by 1996 the median age of marriage for all married women was 17.96 and for all women 19.39. Yadava and Hossain forcefully argue that in order to establish the average age of marriage one has to include young women who are at the age of marriage but are not yet married, which many studies fail to do and hence are likely to under-report the mean age of marriage. Islam and M. Nurul Islam (1999) came to an average age of marriage of only 14.3 years for women. The sample they used seems to be biased, however, as all 1941 women who were included in the survey had been selected on the criteria of being 19 or younger and already married. A survey by Nipport (1997:82) for the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare found that the average age of marriage for women aged between 20 and 24 was 15.3 in 1997. Mean ages vary due to methodological differences, as well as geographical differences in customs and economic and social differences between respondents. Khatun (2002) finds substantial variations in mean age of marriage for women by district. For example, for Gazipur, an area were a large percentage of women in the current study came from, the average age of marriage was found to be 17.5 – which was substantially lower than in other districts.

8. ‘Love marriages’ are becoming increasingly common in urban areas and among garment workers, as well as among the higher classes. This issue is further explored in Chapter 8.
custom of paying a bride price to that of dowry – in other words, from benefiting the parents of the bride and the bride herself, to benefiting the groom and his family. This shift accounts for one of the key changes that took place in gender relations in the course of the 20th century in Bangladesh, as it led to an ‘economic devaluation’ of women and negatively affected their social position (Kabeer 2000:60). While in the past the bride price could be substantial, there was no set rule and negative consequences seldom occurred even when no bride price was given. The process of marriage negotiation seemed to have been simpler in contrast to the often stiff contemporary negotiations concerning dowry and marriage (Amin & Cain 1997:293). In the beginning of the 1980s, van Schendel (1981:109) concluded that families with several daughters were certain to experience economic deterioration as a result of having to marry them off. Dowry demands have increased since then.9

As it is socioculturally unacceptable for a daughter to remain unmarried, girls may become liabilities for their parents whereas boys will not. However, marriages with a small or no dowry payment also occur, particularly if the marriage entails ‘marrying down’ to a man of a lower socio-economic standing than the bride’s family or marriage to a man who is old, divorced or already married. These often turn out to be poorly matched marriages (Amin & Cain 1997; Siddiqui 2001). Marriage generally involves a radical change in a woman’s life as she moves from her own family into the new family, which often resides in another village or area. A newly-wed woman’s position is usually low within the new household. She not only has to please her husband, but also has an obligation to the whole family and is often under the watchful eye of her mother-in-law (White 1992:112). Since marriage has become an economic asset for many grooms and their families, a young wife’s treatment by her in-laws may correlate with the dowry payments made. The vulnerable position of young brides is widely known, and most brides-to-be have witnessed a newly married woman’s situation first hand.

Thus, to young women marriage may represent both a much desired and a frightening or unappealing experience. Although a bride’s consent is a prerequisite for marriage in Muslim tradition, young women are not always involved in their own marriage negotiations or the choosing of a spouse. Islam and Islam (1999) found in a survey amongst young married women that 52% had not been asked their opinion concerning their marriage. It is widely argued that women are often confronted with finalized negotiations and are expected not to show any dismay (White 1992:97; Dannecker 1998; Islam & Islam 1999:177). Our data, however, show that during the marriage negotiations many young women had been consulted by and had received information from their parents or from brothers who were involved in the matter. Although it was unusual to openly and directly object to the decision, many had influenced the decision making concerning their future marriages in one way or another. Several women worried about their future marriage and felt burdened, as

---

9. The size of dowries varies according to class and background, and often comprise cash and goods, including jewellery (see also White 1992:104). Many families have to indebt themselves to pay the tens of thousands of takas demanded for dowry.
was expressed by Ruzina. Some women had decided to migrate so that their families would not be burdened by large expenditures for their future marriages, an argument that often appears in the literature (Chantavanich et al. 2001; Oishi 2002:11).

The issue of marriage generally influenced the unmarried women’s motivations to migrate in more diverse and proactive ways. Three different but often overlapping reasons can be distinguished: to improve the woman’s future choice of marriage partner; to avoid or postpone an impending marriage; or to get away from painful or embarrassing experiences related to failed marriage negotiations.

Improving the future choice of marriage partner

As seen earlier, personal and familial needs and desires can, but do not necessarily overlap. Thirteen of the eighteen women hoped to improve the economic situation of their families while simultaneously improving their own options or role in marriage decisions, as Fatima and Tasnema had done. A desirable husband is generally defined as a man who is unmarried, educated, not too old and comes from a family with a respectable socio-economic background, and who will treat his wife well. Equally important, he should be someone they like and have consented to marry. Women’s families did not have the necessary means to pay for a dowry for such a ‘good’ groom. It was reasoned that if the women had not migrated and earned additional money, the odds of their being married to undesirable grooms would have been higher (see also Siddiqui 2001:45). It was anticipated that earning money for a dowry, or a larger dowry, would enhance their choice of marriage partner and would thus positively affect their future happiness. As Rubya, a young unmarried woman, said: ‘I want to earn a lot of money; then I can buy a good husband.’

Some authors use the term ‘centrality’ in order to highlight women’s attempts to move from marginalized positions within household decision-making and exclusion to positions of greater centrality, inclusion and ‘voice’ (Mc Carthy 1967 in White 1992; Kabeer 1998). In other words, striving for more voice and inclusion within the marriage institution (i.e. having a more ‘central’ role in the decision-making regarding their own marriage) was believed to best serve their future well-being. Seeking autonomy or total independence by avoiding marriage was not often desired. These women’s decision to improve their future say in choosing a marriage partner hence also reflects their attempts to increase their decision-making ability and scope for self-determination, moves that entailed stretching or redefining gendered notions concerning women’s role in marriage.

Postponing or avoiding an impending marriage

Although the women envisioned that they would marry one day, they were nonetheless critical of the institution of marriage. The dowry system was considered very problematic. Several unmarried women stated it was the ‘number one’ problem in their lives. Many women objected to their families becoming indebted, only for them to join husbands and in-laws who they may not even want to be with. As Azma (18), a strong-willed and confident unmarried woman, said:
You know, our economic condition is bad; we are very poor. I do not want to go to a ‘rich’ husband’s home and become engaged in family life, while my father is working as a wage labourer. It was my wish to come here. My father did not want to send me; he wanted to send my brother. I had to beg and tell them I would run away if they did not allow me to go. I was bold, and in the end they allowed me to go.

As it turned out, Azma, like several other women, felt resentful and outraged about the potential grooms and their families’ high demands. Although she had initially emphasized that she had decided to migrate ‘for the good of the family’, it became clear that her motive was in some way contentious. She did not desire to marry the man with whom negotiations had been going on, and had opted out of this decision and undesired fate.

For the majority of the unmarried women, negotiations had already begun regarding their marriage. For various reasons, the negotiations sometimes failed. For at least one third of the unmarried women with whom we had in-depth conversations, the negotiations had been going on for a while. However, the women in question, like Azma, had not been content with the chosen groom-to-be, which influenced their decision to migrate.

The story of Sharifa (19) exemplifies how this reasoning can be compounded by other difficulties. Sharifa is a calm and intelligent woman who had obtained her higher secondary certificate (HSC). She comes from a relatively affluent family: her father is a retired army man and a landowner. Sharifa stated in the survey that she wanted to be independent. She explained that finding a suitable job had not been easy, as she had no university degree. She had always been drawn to foreign countries; she had relatives living in Canada. She initially explained that since it was not possible to move to Canada, she went to Malaysia instead. Later, during a more confidential conversation, she casually added another reason for migrating: ‘My father wanted me to marry, he had chosen a groom, but I did not like him. I did not want to marry him.’ Sharifa’s incentive for migration was double-edged, as it was for quite a few of the other women. Furthering her education and “establishing herself” were quite important to her. These women wanted to do something for themselves instead of getting married right away. It was often not the dowry that was the main problem, but a lack of say over whom and when to marry. Many women wanted not only to have a bigger say in their lives, but also to achieve something for themselves.

This confidential information was not revealed until a return visit to Malaysia a year after the first interview. The secrecy surrounding this issue further reflects the sociocultural incorrectness of this reason for migration. Although most of these unmarried women realized that they could not or did not want to avoid marriage in the long run, they felt they could postpone it and perhaps attempt to alter its course. It is interesting to note that several studies among garment workers in Dhaka also found that young women had hoped to postpone marriage by working in a factory (Paul-Majunder & Chaudauri Zohir 1995; Dannecker 1998; Kabeer 2000).
Getting away from marriage negotiations

Such emotions as pain, shame, anger and resentment over the break-up or absence of a desired marriage played an important role for at least five of the unmarried women. As Ruzina’s example showed earlier, the absence of suitable grooms for a woman and her sisters can cause intense pain and feelings of shame. For a few women, negotiations to marry desired grooms had failed because the necessary consent had not been obtained or there had been conflicts over the amount of dowry to be paid. These situations had led to feelings of outrage, insult and pain. These women wanted to ‘get away’ from it all, to forget the humiliation. Some also wanted to show that they could make it on their own and perhaps prompt a twist in their projected futures.

The story of Nazma (18) exemplifies this aspect and further illustrates the complexity of the issues involved. The motivation for migration provided in the survey involved wanting to help her family economically (group b – those whose families had faced sudden economic setbacks). However, during a follow-up interview, new aspects were added:

I came because of our economic condition and my mental frustration. My father died leaving an outstanding a loan of 200,000 takas. (...) I felt that with the economic pressure on my older brothers, it would be hard for them to look after me when they have their own families to look after. I had the intention to teach in primary school. I could not. Moreover, I became depressed when my uncle, who is a doctor, did not want to help me to gain admission to a nursing college after high school. I then felt I wanted to be economically independent, to be self-reliant. Because of the anger that I possessed against my uncle and to also show him that I can do better without his help, I forced myself to come here.10

Nazma felt frustrated and angry when her chances for personal achievement were thwarted, especially while seeing her own cousin sisters pursuing their careers – a frustration that was aired by several of the young women. She resented the fact that her uncle, who was well connected, ‘refused to help’ her, as she put it. Nazma felt compelled to prove that she could make it without his help. She migrated not only ‘for the benefit of her family’ but also to pursue her own interests.

While visiting her in her hometown after her return to Bangladesh, it became clear that yet another reason had been important in her decision to migrate. Before Nazma had left Bangladesh, she and a young man in her village had been very eager to marry one another. However, their respective families blocked their plans as a result of a severe feud between the families. Marriage was out of the question, and they were forbidden to see each other. In Nazma’s case, frustrations over education and job prospects, however real and valid, were crucially intertwined with wanting to

10. The exchange rate in the summer of 1999 when these interviews were held was 1 taka = 2 euro cents.
escape humiliation and emotional hardship. Her anger had fuelled the desire to become economically independent. Nazma’s story shows how class and gender limitations interlink and limit a woman’s possibilities. It also points to the complexity and the multilayered character that migration decisions can obtain. Moreover, it underlines that people may be inclined to represent their motivations in what are conceived to be respectable ways, particularly when the underlying issues are viewed as shameful or socially sensitive. Moving to a new country is seen a chance to partly recreate oneself. Nazma had also held back from telling her housemates or us the full story while in Malaysia because of these feelings of shame and loss of honour. Like the other women in similar situations, she had wanted to make a fresh start.

Although the majority of the unmarried women had been actively involved in decisions to migrate, a few of the women (5 of the 64 unmarried women) had had no choice and were sent by their families. Farhana’s story is illustrative:

My maternal uncle sent me. We were so indebted to him. We had some land, but my grandfather had not given us much, and we lost some land following some conflicts. Then my father became ill. (…) Slowly, all the money was used for his treatment. My mother had to take out a loan of 10,000 takas from Grameen Bank. My father bought a cow with the money. Each week an instalment of 500 takas had to be paid, but we also needed that money for our study and survival. (…) Mother managed to borrow it from other people, with interest. In this way, all our land and property was sold for my father’s treatment, our food and clothing. My brother also studied. Don’t you know how much money it costs to get a degree? The loan amount became very large. Later on, other micro-credit loans were taken from BRAC, Krishi Bank and other cooperatives. Sister, believe me! Our house is now the size of this room. Apart from this, we have nothing.

Baby’s parents did not agree with her departure. She was only 15 at the time, yet they had little choice but to comply. High-interest debt to micro-credit programmes had severely strained the family’s finances and had influenced the migration decision. It was found that several households were caught in debt traps due to micro-credit loans. As one respondent said: ‘Grameen Bank’s people don’t care. People may even be close to dying, but still the instalments have to be paid.’ Poverty and no available sons who could be sent abroad also played a major role for the unmarried women who had not made the migration decision themselves.

In sum, unmarried women’s reasons for migration varied and were generally more proactive than initially portrayed by the women. Several reasons were often involved. While many unmarried women aimed to better the lives of their families, most unmarried women’s decisions to migrate were simultaneously geared towards overcoming socio-economic limitations and improving their own futures.
Married women

A total of 17 married women were interviewed extensively concerning their migration motivations. For most of them, enhancing their economic security was a major goal. Rani (34) recalled:

At that time I had no clothes to wear and we had little food to eat. I could not fulfil my children’s requests. When my daughter was in class 2, she asked for a bag. I said when you are in a higher class you will need lots of books and then I will buy you a bag. But I could not. I felt so upset.

Five of the women migrated specifically for the good of the family, which included their children’s education. As their husbands were working and the migration fee for women was lower than it was for men, women felt they could migrate ‘just as well’. However meagre the income, they did not want their husbands to give up their jobs. Their decisions had been active and their mindset was determined. Their husbands eventually agreed.

For two thirds of the married women, additional reasons were given for their migration decision, and these were often related to their marital situation. The words of Zobiada (32) are illustrative. She had migrated to secure her 16-year-old daughter’s higher education; however, she also said:

My husband is another person’s son. If he does not like me any more, he can discard me, just like that. It is as with a pair of shoes: as long as they fit, everything is okay; if not, he dumps them. He can tell me to leave. I came to make my own future.

Economic insecurity was related to marital instability. Women’s lack of access to land and opportunities for income generation, combined with their high risk of being subjected to abuse and social criticism when on their own, makes them acutely vulnerable to the dissolution of relationships with men (White 1992:113; Rozario 1998; Kabeer 2000). Most women with marital problems had not regarded divorce as a viable option. Remaining married was important for their security and sociocultural status upon their return. As Rubya (30) told us: ‘I am not like you two. I have not studied; I do not have a good income and position. I need a husband for my protection. Isn’t that true?’

This was ‘true’ from her perspective and experience, and was echoed in many conversations with other women who had strategically assessed the alternatives. In addition, a few other women did not want to divorce for reasons of emotional attachment. Thus, those who faced marital challenges chose to migrate temporarily in order to improve their situation within the marital domain.

Two, partially overlapping problems related to the marriage institution had influenced married women’s migrations: frustration with the economic performance of a husband and gendered limitations on work; and the need to get away from unsatisfying or abusive marriages.
Frustration with economic performance of husband and gendered limitations on work

Five women’s migrations were largely influenced by frustration over their husbands’ meagre earnings and the way they allocated money. They harboured a strong desire to do better, to earn and make brighter their and their children’s futures, something that they felt incapable of doing at home. Ferdousi’s story is exemplifying of married women who were determined to take control of their lives. Ferdousi explained:

Some years ago I was in Saudi Arabia with my husband. I led my life there as a housewife. My husband, apart from doing a job, had a business and we earned some extra money from it. Staying abroad is very pleasant for me, because males and females can enjoy equal rights. And everybody is engaged in their respective jobs; no-one is sitting idle. When we returned to our village in Bangladesh, we did not have any income. My husband had an accident and could not work. We had some agricultural land but no-one was looking after it. So we did not have an income from this land. Then I came to my family in Dhaka because I was angry with my husband and his uncle. My husband’s maternal uncle, who was our neighbour, had a hostile attitude towards me. My husband gave him a lot of money. Whoever came to my husband for any financial help would get it. This way he misused about one lak [100,000] takas. As a result, I was facing serious difficulties in taking care of my three children. Because of this, I thought that if I stayed in the village I may not be able to give my children a good start for their future, and day by day I am getting older.

Then, considering all sides, I decided to go to bidesh and show my husband how I can survive without his help. I was never afraid of going outside the country and taking an overseas job. I never liked the difference between a man and woman in the matter of service [i.e. work]. I also do not support the mentality that a woman should always keep herself inside the house. I believe in the equal rights of man and woman. But I did not get any chance to improve my condition [as yet]. I want to do so much. As a woman, I would like to do so many things, but I do not get any support from anyone.

In the survey, Ferdousi had initially stated that she had migrated to improve the economic situation of her family, particularly for the good of her children. Other issues, however, were also influential. She was highly frustrated with her husband’s behaviour, his laziness, her dependence on him and the barriers to economic activity that she as a woman faced. She and her colleagues (whom I also interviewed) strongly opposed prevalent gender roles, women’s limited opportunities for jobs and inequality between spouses. These women, whose migration decisions were initially presented as being for the good of the family in general or for the children in particular, had evidently migrated for more individualistic reasons as well. Their main goal was to become more independent economically. In these cases, generalizations con-
cerning women’s migration as mere ‘extensions of women’s motherly and wifely responsibilities’ (Bjer 1997:242) do not hold.

Escaping unsatisfying or abusive marriages

The decisions of five of the other women migrate were due to marriages that were dominated by conflicts or that were abusive. All of the women in this group lived in a poor neighbourhood in Dhaka that had yielded several migrant women over the years. Some of the husbands were addicted to alcohol or gambling; physical abuse and emotional and economic neglect were endemic. Women inspired each other to migrate and escape their marriages, and the demonstration effect was of great importance (see also Siddiqui 2001:47). Although the possibility to earn money and do something for oneself also played a major role, these women’s primary incentive was to escape painful and difficult situations. On a secondary level, it was also a way of protesting.

Migration was often a topic of discussion among the women in the neighbourhood, particularly immediately after fights or setbacks with husbands, as we witnessed during our visits in Dhaka. Although for most of these women thoughts of escape via migration would never materialize, it seemed to provide many of them with a sense of opportunity, a chance to temporarily ‘get out’, as Shazeda’s story demonstrates. She was in her mid thirties and had three children; her husband had married two additional wives:

A husband is like honey, but he can make your life terrible. My husband and his third wife often come and stay all day. We eat together and at night they leave. I see them go and I wonder: ‘What life do I have?’ I cannot sleep; I cannot eat. This is the main problem of my life. I often wonder what is so wrong with me that he needed to remarry.

Shazeda suffered greatly from the emotional neglect of her husband, who also physically abused her when he was drunk. She felt humiliated and profoundly hurt. She left to escape the painful situation and to earn an income for herself and her children. While she was away, however, she also hoped that an economically successful return would restore her husband’s respect and love for her. Divorce was thus avoided not only for socio-economic but also for emotional reasons.

Divorced and widowed women

Thirteen divorced women and four widowed women were interviewed extensively during the course of the study. Their migration decisions were compounded by a lack of choice due to limited job opportunities for female breadwinners and socio-economic vulnerability. Their economic deprivation was related to their marital status. Although many of them received financial support from their parents or siblings, and more than half earned additional wages, the future was generally percei-
It is estimated that about 30% of all rural households in Bangladesh are headed by females. These households are generally worse off than male-headed households (Siddiqui 2001; Mannan 2000). Many struggle to make ends meet, and the lack of job opportunities for women is problematic. Although it is their right to inherit land from their fathers, women generally own less property than men. Many do not insist on their inheritance rights but leave it to their brothers, in order to ensure that their brothers will look after them when protection and assistance is needed. They thus opt to enhance their fallback position (Agarwal 1994). Within the prevalent gender division of labour in Bangladesh, most aspects of public life are mediated through males. Divorced or widowed women may thus need the help of male mediators/guardians in their daily lives. This dependence greatly troubled many of the divorced and widowed women. A woman who has been divorced or abandoned often returns to her family, as she knows she can rely on them for her survival and/or protection (White 1992). Although parents may want to bring back their daughter if she is abused, her return home is not always welcomed and siblings may be opposed to having to work to feed an additional mouth. If a divorced or widowed woman returns home, guardians may attempt to marry her off again. Since her marriage ‘value’ has decreased, a marriage of convenience may be sought; that is, arranging a marriage to a man who is divorced or widowed or who is poor, for whom a smaller dowry is needed.

Most divorced and widowed women in this study wanted to improve their own and their children’s economic position and to enlarge their range of opportunities. Divorced women in particular often stated that they wanted to repair ‘an unhappy life’. The reasons for separation and divorce were manifold. Several women had stayed with their husbands for only a few months. Divorce was often the result of ill treatment or abandonment; husbands had been abusive or suffered from one or more forms of addiction, had demanded additional dowries or were too ‘lazy’ to work and provide. A few divorces seemed related to the fact that the woman was still childless. The economic incentives were closely related to one or several of the following aspects: wanting more independence from their relatives; restoring their honour and prestige; getting over painful memories; and self-determination regarding their marital status.

A combination of striving for greater economic independence and leaving for emotional reasons or to escape frustration and humiliation were important for several of the divorced women’s decisions. The story of Sabina (29) is a case in point. Her husband had left her for another woman when her second baby was born, seven years prior to her migration. Since then, she had lived with one of her siblings or her mother. Her relatives were doing well. They owned several buildings and rented out apartments. Sabina had earned some money by doing embroidery and being a caretaker of her sister’s apartment building. Her earnings, however, were too low to sustain her family. There was often tension, as she and her children were regarded to be drawing continuously on the family income. Sabina had a strong desire to be financially independent:
I am sick of asking for everything all the time. It feels like begging. I want to earn my own money. Also, if I want to arrange a good marriage for my daughter in a good family, I will need money. In Bangladesh, marriage is tough without money.

Sabina resented the fact that her family did not want to help her achieve something herself. Going abroad was the last resort.

Friction with family members is rather common. Breaking free from patronizing relations and rules was an important incentive. As Josna, another divorced woman, said: ‘[...] at home everybody always comments on what I do and do not do; here in bidesh I can decide for myself.’ She had initially cloaked her motivations under the ‘dutiful daughter/altruistic mother’ umbrella of migrating primarily for the economic well-being of the family members, so as to show adherence to prevalent gender norms. Moreover, many women had experienced divorce and return to their fathers’ houses as humiliating. Remarks that were regularly made concerning their ‘husband-less’ and hence decreased status were painful. As Farida put it: ‘I felt very much insulted.’ Acquiring socio-economic status by having ‘established oneself’ abroad was a major goal closely related to restoring one’s honour and self-esteem. For a few of the women, migration was also a means to get away from painful memories of (sometimes severe) abuse during marriage.

As far as remarriage was concerned, two opposing desires can be discerned. Six of the women (four divorcees and two widows) did not want to ever marry again. Four of them had children. For example, Khadiza said she had been married for two years to a man who was both a gambler and promiscuous. She had no children. Marital conflicts culminated in a demand for an additional 300,000 takas of dowry, which her husband wanted to use to go abroad. Her father had offered to pay half the sum, but it was refused. Khadiza had not conceived a baby, which might also have played a role. Khadiza finally returned home:

My father discouraged me from going to bidesh and said that since I did not have any financial crisis, I should not leave the country. But I was rigid in my decision. I did not want to marry again. [...] Later, I want to do some business. In our country now the women are also engaged in business. So there is no harm in investing some money in business.

Khadiza went to Malaysia to get away and avoid being married off again. She wanted to have a say for once over her life and to ‘do something for herself’. As for the women with children, a woman who remarries will usually have to leave her children behind when she moves into her new husband’s household. Ironically, for several women, leaving for Malaysia was part of a strategy to eventually be able to live with their children again.

On the other hand, seven divorcees who had no children wanted to remarry. These women’s aspirations and concerns were very similar to those of the unmarried women who aimed to improve their chances of netting a desirable groom through their migration. Five of them had presented themselves to us, and generally also to their peers, as unmarried, although they were actually divorced. Their ‘true’ marital
status was discovered only at a late stage of the fieldwork when talking to relatives, friends and neighbours in Bangladesh. Their reason for migration was not necessarily only or primarily to help their poor families, as had often been stated, but decisions were influenced by the hope of restoring their position. The families of three of these women seemed to hold them responsible for the divorce. Proving their worth to their families was important to them. Their decision to conceal their marital status reflected the relative disadvantage and undesired social status of being divorced and the accompanying feelings of shame and pain as well as their desire to remarry.11

In sum, women’s motivations for migration were diverse and complex. While these often encompassed the hope to overcome economic restraints (which the survey showed to be the primary reason for migration), the qualitative data revealed that these motives were socioculturally embedded. Through earning money in overseas factories, a large share of women simultaneously aimed to proactively overcome the sociocultural constraints of their gender, particularly in regards to marriage and work-related issues.

5.6 Men’s migration motivations

The questionnaire used among the women was administered to 60 Bangladeshi men in order to put gendered migration motivations into perspective. It was supplemented with 15 interviews and numerous informal conversations over the course of the study. Of the men surveyed, 48% were working in the same factories as the women while 54% were ‘working next door’ (i.e. working in different factories but in the same FTZs). The socio-economic characteristics of the men in general were found to differ from those of the women in some important ways. With residency averaging 55 months, the men had been in Malaysia for a year longer than the women, and they had been slightly older than the women when they first arrived (24 on average, compared to 22 for the women). Moreover, the vast majority of the men (73%) were unmarried when they came to Malaysia, compared to 46% of the women. Of the men, 27% were married; the figure for the women was 26%. None of the men said they were widowed or divorced (for women the latter accounted for respectively 7% and 22%). Almost all of the men were part of large joint families with one or more brothers working; 58% stated that their father was also still working. Only two married men lived in a nuclear family. Households consisted on average of 9 persons; 40% of the men’s households consisted of 10–15 persons. The women’s households consisted of 7 persons on average. As table 5.8 shows, on average men had attained significantly higher education than their female colleagues. Only 5% were illiterate compared to 32% of the women.

11. Their actual marital status was not discussed further in order to respect the respondent’s choice of self-representation and to avoid embarrassment.
Table 5.8: Level of education of men and women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illiterate</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 1-3</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 4-6</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 7-10</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSC</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSC</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The difference in educational levels between men and women largely reflects the differences in socio-economic background between the sexes. Most men (92%) came from households that owned land. Although 67% of the women’s households owned land too, they typically held small plots. In only 9% of the women’s households were landholdings large enough to generate substantial revenues. In contrast, 46% of the men’s households owned large plots of land and thrived on the revenues. For another 32% of the men’s households, revenues from land were combined with other sources of income. Although not necessarily affluent, most of the families in both categories did not suffer from immediate cash shortages. The male family members were engaged in activities ranging from farming and welding, to public service and running small or medium-sized businesses. The remaining 22% of the men came from households that owned little or no land and had unstable income sources. Some had faced sudden economic demands due to death or business failures.

Of all the men in the household, the average number of people working for an income was 1.6, excluding the respondent. With large families and ageing and retiring fathers, additional income sources were desired. As many as 44% of all male respondents were unemployed before migrating; another 30% had helped out in family businesses (20%) or had worked the family land (10%), but were effectively underemployed.

Employment issues featured strongly in men’s motivations for migration. Most men stated that they came for economic reasons, which is in line with the findings of many other studies on Bangladeshi men (Gardner 1993; Bruyn & Kuddus 2005). Although the economic situation of the male migrants’ households were generally not as pressing as that of the women’s households, economic motivations were predominant for 85% of the men as compared to 66% of the women. Fifteen per cent of the men left for other personal reasons, ranging from seeking adventure to escaping personal problems or being engaged in political movements that had become too
violent (see table 5.9). As far as the decision-making was concerned, table 5.10 shows that 52% of the men had themselves made the decision to migrate, as compared to 45% of the women. It is significant to note that as many as 25% of all men said that they had been sent by their fathers and older brothers, and thus had had little say in the matter, as shown by the story of Abdul, Ruzina’s brother. In contrast, however, only 7% of the women had been sent. During conversations, several of these men said that migration had not been their first choice and that they would rather have continued their education.

Table 5.9: Men’s primary reason for migration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic reasons</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To enhance own future (economically)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To see other countries</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political reasons</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get away from a situation at home</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>60</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fathers or brothers deemed it appropriate that they would go to bidesh. Although the economic situation was not always severe, they were often from large households with many dependants to be fed and educated, and the respondent was expected to enhance the household’s economic situation. Moreover, many of the 52% who had made the decision themselves stressed that they had to earn for their families. Particularly the eldest sons, whether married or unmarried, said that ‘I have a large responsibility – I am the eldest son’.

Table 5.10: Decision-making concerning migration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision Model</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(31)</td>
<td>(62)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Together with family members</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(14)</td>
<td>(67)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father, brothers, other relatives</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(15)</td>
<td>(10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(60)</td>
<td>(139)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The men’s migration incentives and personal situations were further discussed during informal conversations and interviews. The observed feelings of responsibility towards their families were reinforced. Jamal’s story (18) is illustrative. His father was a civil servant with a secure job, but when he died suddenly, the family was left without an income.

I went to a private American college. When my father died I had to quit. I needed to look after my mother and siblings. My sisters need to be married, so my uncles and I decided that I would go to Malaysia. I had to build my family’s future.
He did what he felt he had to do for the family, not unlike such women as Ruzina, Tasnema and Fatima, as quoted earlier. Migrant men with sisters or daughters were obviously burdened by the dowry system too. Meanwhile, like the women, many men had personal goals that they simultaneously attempted to achieve. Jamal:

I had a plan. Once I got to Malaysia, I would try to go to the UK or Canada. There you can make more money. I am interested in going there and finding a job. Bangladesh is not good. There is no future for me; even those with diplomas are unemployed. You need money for bribes to get a job and good connections. I already have some contacts to go to the UK. I hope it all works out.

Most men envisioned that by keeping some money aside, they could start their own businesses on return, migrate to another country or build a separate house for their own families or families-to-be. Although men seemed more pressured into migration than women, their feelings of responsibility were combined with goals to improve their own futures. Additionally, non-economic personal reasons were important for a few men. Several young men had left the country due to their involvement in contentious political parties, and their parents were afraid that their son’s life was at risk. A few had left to avoid shame or embarrassing situations after certain incidents, which they chose not to disclose in detail.

While the literature often relates women’s migration incentives to prevalent gender notions and definitions of womanhood, it hardly ever relates men’s motivations for migration to gender norms. Yet they are as just as gendered. As Kabeer (2000:85) put it: ‘the question “why work?” is not asked of men anywhere in the world – it is assumed that they have to.’ Literature on masculinities has highlighted the link between masculinity and men’s working lives, or more specifically, men’s assigned roles as providers for women and children (Elmhirst 2007:229).

Economic incentives were closely linked to the lack of adequate job opportunities in Bangladesh: men often migrated to ‘escape a life of unemployment’. As discussed in Chapter 3, unemployment rates in Bangladesh are high and, relatively speaking, are often even higher for educated men (Siddiqui 2003:2). For many of these young men, the future prospects had seemed utterly bleak. They felt frustrated over failed attempts to find appropriate jobs in Bangladesh, even though money for bribes had been available. Although not all men’s households were necessarily ‘poor’, many referred to themselves and their desh (homeland) as ‘economically deprived’. The role of the demonstration effect cannot be overestimated. Most of the men, or their fathers and brothers who had made the migration decision for them, had been strongly influenced by the success stories of those who had migrated before and the promising images spread through the grapevine. Every town and village had examples of men who had migrated. Although they may not have always been successful, the general image portrayed was one of fortune. The migration myth is unmistakably powerful. Personal and economic reasons mix with peer pressure, a sense of adventure, escapism and the desire to become economically successful through working in bidesh.
Like Jamal, several men wanted to go to countries in the northern hemisphere, such as Italy or Canada, where it was believed that more money could be earned. Agents’ fees, however, were much larger and unaffordable to many, and the risks for undocumented migrants were high. Malaysia was therefore seen as the second best option.

As seen earlier, men generally marry later; it hence was not exceptional that most men were not yet married. Nevertheless, marriage considerations were part of many unmarried men’s decisions, either directly or indirectly. Because of the dowry system, the economic standing of a family improves when a son marries, which makes the act itself lucrative. However, a groom must also support his family-to-be. Due to social customs, as well as for practical reasons, many men felt they could not marry until they had attained a proper income or job to sustain their dependants.

Nonetheless, remaining single for an indefinite period of time is less contentious for men than for women, since men’s social status is not linked to their marital status to the degree that it is for women. Even so, many unmarried men were concerned about their future marriage and aimed to build a stable financial base for their future family.

5.7 Conclusion

The literature often depicts Asian women’s decision to migrate and work in factories as being induced by the needs of their families. These decisions are frequently regarded as ‘unfree’ (Willis & Yeoh 2000; Chantavanich 2001; Oishi 2002:). As Pearson (1998:182) rightly notes, however, women may to some extent also seek overseas employment in order to liberate themselves from their families and to pursue alternative futures. While we were given diverse motivations for migration, we found that in addition to providing earnings for the family, migration was often regarded as a temporary ‘opting out’, allowing the women to overcome confining structures and gender roles and to enhance their future opportunities. By temporarily migrating to another ‘place’, they aimed to eventually create more ‘space’ for themselves, both economically and socioculturally.

We also found that many women initially presented their migration decisions as being for the good of the family, as this incentive is most in line with the dominant gender discourse, while their sociocultural and personal inclinations are generally more controversial. Qualitative research methods were found essential to reveal aspects that are sensitive. Women who migrate often stretch gendered boundaries.

The decision taken by most of the women who said that they had decided to migrate for economic reasons, was also influenced not only by the fact that their movements were confined and the labour markets were gendered, but also because of the marriage institution, its image and its institutionalized commoditization. As Constable (2003:163) also observed among Filipino domestic migrants, many Bangladeshi female migrants creatively manoeuvred across transnational terrain in order to realize their desired marital subjectivities. It is clear that migrants’ social locations and migration incentives are intrinsically linked to the socio-economic situation of their
country. They generally strive for the betterment of their households’ well-being. Based on ties, affection and responsibility, bettering the situation of their families is felt to be personally enriching as well. The discussion in this chapter has shown that migration incentives are often complex and multilayered. Notions like ‘dutiful daughter’ or ‘sacrificial/altruistic mothers’, which are frequently linked to women’s migrations, are inappropriate in the current context as they do not capture the complexities of people’s migrations and encompass a tendency to reduce female migrants to ‘victims’.

Although the literature on migration generally refers only to the gendered expectations of female migrants, it is important to note that men too are subject to gender expectations by their families and society at large. These inevitably also feature in migration decisions. For migrant men, these are closely related to prominent definitions of masculinity that define men as providers for their families. Although young men have more socio-economic room to manoeuvre than young women do, it is also part of the gendered code that they obey fathers and elder brothers. While men’s migrations were also frequently personally motivated, men were found to be more often sent abroad by the family and expected to earn for the household.
CHAPTER 6: FROM DESIRE TO DECISION AND DEPARTURE

This chapter takes a closer look at how the migrants materialized their decision to migrate. As seen in the previous chapter, a quarter of all the men were found to have migrated at the request of their fathers or older brothers. The other men chose to migrate as a way to escape a perceived dead-end future. Within a context in which male migration is generally glorified as a way to economic success, it is hardly surprising that these men obtained the consent of their families relatively easily. Their concerns are mostly about obtaining work permits and visas from legitimate agents. In contrast, for many of the Bangladeshi women, migrating depended primarily not on activating social networks – a concept upon which many pre-migration analyses focus – but on obtaining the necessary familial consent.

6.1 Decision-making processes of female migrants and gendered constraints

As shown by the survey results, many of the women had initiated their moves themselves. Of the 47 women who had extensively discussed the actual migration decision-making process, the majority (40 women; 85%) had taken a proactive role. Several women who had said in the survey that the decision was mutual, explained during in-depth interviews that first they had had to convince their guardians. The decision and permission to migrate had often not come about easily. To better understand the decision-making process and the dynamics that are at play, it is instructive to focus more attention on the prevalent ascriptions of femininity and masculinity in Bangladesh.

The way a society regards female sexuality influences the way gender roles are defined. Most cultures historically aim to control female sexuality. Mernissi (1975) divides societies into two types: those that control sexuality by emphasizing the internalization of rules through the socialization process, and those that draw on external rules and regulations to govern sexual behaviour. The underlying conceptualizations of sexuality differ markedly. Mernissi argues that societies that largely draw on the internalization of sexual prohibitions conceptualize female sexuality as predominantly non-active, while societies that prescribe a variety of rules and practices for women’s behaviour – such as veiling – have an implicit concept of female sexuality as active (Mernissi 1975:3, in Rozario 1992:84). In Bangladesh, as in many societies that are predominantly Islamic, female sexuality is generally defined as active and is considered dangerous. Women have the power to tempt men, and thus need to be controlled (Rozario 1992:99). Gender norms instil guidelines for appropriate behaviour for women in order to keep women’s power in check. A central concept is women’s purity and honour (izzat). An honourable woman is a pure woman, that is, sexually pure; she is associated with total absence of power and is not sexually or otherwise threatening. A woman therefore needs to be not only con-
trolled but also protected and guarded. She is regarded as weak and vulnerable, but simultaneously as potentially sexually powerful.

A woman’s purity or honour impacts the status of her family. The virtue and the modesty of kinswomen are pivotal to the honour of the family as a whole. Honour is actively achieved and therefore generally regarded as a man’s responsibility. While izzat relates to the behaviour of both sexes, it is predominantly associated with the actions of women. Since a man’s honour is reflected by the virtue of the women who are directly related to him, men’s roles as protectors are of crucial importance within the family structure. Consequently, guardians generally play a pivotal role in women’s lives. These guardians are initially fathers and brothers, and later her husband and son(s). From birth onwards, girls are socialized with an ideology of male dependence and boys with the role of protector. If for whatever reason a woman does not have a guardian, she may be stigmatized as being promiscuous. Since she is not guarded, it is assumed she might engage in inappropriate activities and immoral behaviour (Rozario 1992:99, 1998:259; Kabeer 2000). This same reasoning is not uncommonly used as an excuse to take advantage of women who are on their own. Therefore, as Kabeer (2000:187) rightfully argues, within the sociocultural context of Bangladesh, male protection can be even more important to a woman than male provision.

In addition to being guarded, women are expected to guard their honour by living in purdah (Chapter 3). A core element of purdah is women’s confinement to the domestic space and the private sphere, which traditionally entails their seclusion from the public sphere, which is the realm of men. Women’s interactions with unrelated men must be minimized. Purdah also entails a code of conduct that regulates a woman’s behaviour towards men. They should be obedient and modest: they should lower their eyes in front of men, speak with a soft voice and wear concealing clothing so as not to tempt men. A woman’s honour is thus reflected in the whole range of her everyday behaviour: the way she acts, walks, dresses and behaves with her kin and neighbours, and interacts with men (Rozario 1992:85; Kabeer 2000:35).

Although purdah structures the social interactions between women and men to a large extent, it also needs to be acknowledged that gender norms are not entirely fixed or unambiguous. In every culture there are discrepancies between norms (ideals) and practice. However limited and contested, people who feel confined by gendered norms look for room to manoeuvre and to stretch those boundaries (cf. Steenbeek 1995). As seen in Chapter 3, over the past decades a narrow interpretation of purdah became no longer economically sustainable for many poor women. As early as 1978, McCarthy (1978:16) noted that definitions of purdah in Bangladesh seemed to be shifting from being structurally and outwardly defined by confinements related to the home compound and the veil, towards more internal definitions of ‘individual responsibility and control’. During the 1980s and 1990s, several studies came to similar conclusions (Siddiqi 1991; Simmons, Mita & Koenig 1992; Amin 1997; Rozario 1998: Kabeer 1994, 2000:91). When women went to work in the garment industry en masse, they redefined the meaning of purdah by emphasizing a ‘purdah of the mind’. Instead of highlighting the ‘outer’ qualities of staying in the domestic compound, an increasing number of women based their activities on
the emphasis of ‘inner’ qualities related to guarding their own izzat. These women paved the way for other women for whom economic necessity was not always the primary reason to work outside the home.

Similarly, the women in this study were found to have interpreted the notion of purdah quite broadly. To them, purdah foremost resembled a state of mind whereby instead of seeing their izzat as primarily a responsibility of others (guardians), they chose to emphasize their own responsibility in terms of maintaining appropriate behaviour while pursuing jobs outside the home compound and the country. However, not everybody was in favour of this interpretation. Since a woman’s migration stretches traditional gender boundaries, as it entails leaving and living away from home and guardians, it often evokes opposition and controversy among family members and relatives.

It is within this sociocultural context that the women’s decision-making process must be understood. Most, though not all of those who desired to migrate sought consent and cooperation from family members, particularly guardians. Maintaining, or eventually re-establishing a good relation with their guardians was considered necessary for obvious reasons. The woman’s migration would be temporary, and many not only desired but also had to return home after several years due to limitations on work permits. Moreover, the consent and assistance of guardians was crucial in order for the desire to migrate to materialize. Some other studies on Asian women’s employment and/or migration decisions found that secrecy and conflict were not always avoidable, as women challenged the authority of their relatives or husbands while pursuing their employment ambitions (Wolf 1992; Phizacklea 2003:84; Elmhirst 2007:231).

6.2 Decisions, strategies and resources

Of the 47 women interviewed about their decision-making process, 4 had been sent by their guardians, 3 had developed the plan together with their partners or guardians, and 40 (85%) had come up with the idea themselves and had sought approval. For 14 of the women, this process had gone quite smoothly. However, 26 women (a little more than half) had faced severe resistance. These women had strategized carefully to achieve their goal (see table 6.1). Two approaches can be distinguished: finding an ally to help obtain the necessary consent (16 women) and arranging things alone or with the help of allies outside the household, thereby leaving in secrecy and often with conflict (10 women).1

---

1. In two cases these approaches were combined.
Table 6.1: Decision-making process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motive to migrate:</th>
<th>Number of women</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sent by guardians</td>
<td>Guardians decided</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual desire</td>
<td>Migrants and guardians</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migration initiated by</td>
<td>Consent obtained smoothly</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>respondent</td>
<td>Process: convincing ally</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Secrecy and conflict</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sent by guardians*

The few women who were sent by their guardians had little bargaining power and had to comply with their guardians. In two cases, the immediate guardian had little choice due to pressure from relatives to whom they were indebted. Both of these women’s migrations were instrumental for repaying family debts. The other two women in this category were married and were sent not for economic but for personal reasons.2

Farhana’s story revealed a case in which indebtedness led to migration. Farhana was unmarried and was sent by her uncle who had lent substantial amounts of money to her family. She was 15 when she was brought to Dhaka by her aunt and uncle for an interview – ‘it’s just a game’, she was told. Her parents did not agree. Pointing to the growing debts and slim economic prospects, they were pressured and their opinion was overruled. Farhana too was convinced by economic reasoning:

> My uncle suggested investing some money and sending me abroad. He said: ‘If Farhana goes abroad and works, she will be able to pay back the loan and will support her parents.’ Nobody in my house knew about it. My grandfather and relatives explained: ‘Farhana, you should go, there is so much debt in your family. You have to save your father and others.’ I became strong and thought that they were telling the truth. If I earn and give money to my parents, they will be saved from the burden of debt. Thinking along these lines, I went abroad.

Obviously, the uncle held a strong bargaining position. He nevertheless had needed the grandfather as an ally to convince Farhana’s parents. Farhana was reminded of her responsibility to help her family, even though she was only 15. It was no longer a game: she became an investment in order to earn back the money her parents owed him.

---

2. One woman had been married to a man who was back for a short leave from Malaysia. He wanted her to be there with him and work as well in a factory; he arranged it all – she had no choice. The other woman was the second wife of a man whose brother-in-law (of the first wife) did not agree with the second marriage. They had threatened both the husband and the wife, and the man had decided to send his second wife abroad to safeguard her life.
Another young woman had also been sent by a relative. Her brother-in-law had regarded her migration as a good investment for his future. He had convinced her father, who was old and thus largely dependent on others, by emphasizing that an appropriate dowry was needed for her marriage. The uncle convinced the young woman and arranged all the details.

**Mutual agreement**

Three women (one divorced, two married) had gained mutual support from their families. Husbands and other influential household members had all agreed to their migrations and the decisions were made without conflict.

In the literature on female migration, it is sometimes argued that women who migrate under these conditions may have agreed due to internalized feelings of responsibility and may indirectly have been convinced by their environments (Yeoh & Huang 2000; Chantavanich 2001). This may have been the case for the young divorced woman. She was one of the women who presented herself as unmarried to her colleagues and us, whereas she was actually divorced. Her stories indicated that her relatives had made her feel responsible for her divorce. The married women were found to have genuinely wanted to go to bidesh. As Agarwal (1994) argues, perceived compliance may very well reflect the long-term self-interest of the women. Here, personal and familial goals evidently coalesced (cf. Peter 2003:17). The contribution to the good of the household conflates with their own interests and migration was experienced as an empowering move. It is interesting to note that the survey found that as many as 48% of the women had emphasized that their move was one of mutual consideration and decision, while the qualitative data indicated a mere 6%. Many women were found to have actively initiated their migration decision.

**Consent obtained smoothly**

Of the 14 women for whom the process of obtaining consent went smoothly, 12 had been working in the garment sector in Bangladesh prior to their departure. Of these women, four were unmarried, six divorced, three married and one widowed. The two women who had not held paid jobs prior to their departure (both were divorced) had had little trouble in convincing their families of the benefit of their migrations. The 12 women had faced little opposition to their desire to migrate, as their guardians had become accustomed to these women holding jobs and living beyond the confines of the family home. As a second and closely related factor, these women had significant decision-making power and significant positions in their families due to their earnings: their guardians and families relied entirely or partially on their income. Their working status had improved both their position and their prestige. Fatima’s story is a case in point, as is Farida’s, a divorced woman who was living at her parental house in Dhaka, a household that had modest but regular income sources. Farida had been working in a chemical factory for several years:
My father relies on me. He always asked my opinion on family matters. Regarding my desire to come to Malaysia, he said: ‘It is up to you, since you are not getting married again. If you want to go, you can go. We wish you a better future, as long as you do nothing that will hurt us.’

Farida’s venturing out into public space to work had increased not only the economic resources of the household, but also her own skills and experiences (i.e. human/cultural resources). She had simultaneously gained symbolic capital (confidence and trust), which had positively influenced her father’s decision to consent to her migration. Although he reminded her of her responsibility to maintain the family’s social reputation, he had faith in her.

**Convincing an ally**

Sixteen of the women had actively sought the consent of an ally who could assist in obtaining the approval of other influential household members. Given the gender, age and marital status of these women, their position and their decision-making power were limited. Since female migration is considered controversial, they were well aware that they would face opposition regarding their desire to migrate. Knowing that without prior approval and a guardian’s assistance migration would be nearly impossible, they sought an ally. All the allies had good relationships with the respondents, and the allies believed in the virtuous intentions of the women. They considered them to be honourable women who adhered to purdah by controlling their behaviour. The women had both male and female allies, and the allies held different positions within their family hierarchies. Although their positions varied, they all held valuable symbolic, social and/or economic resources that added to their decision-making power and status. The allies included fathers and brothers (in four cases), relatives outside the immediate household (six cases) and female family members (five cases). Rahana, an unmarried woman, explained how she found an ally:

> I told my mother to ask my uncle to send me. My uncle knew many people. But he told me not to go anywhere and leave my mother behind. After that, a lady we addressed as ‘aunt’ came on a holiday from Saudi Arabia. I told her that I was interested in going abroad and asked whether she could make the necessary arrangements for me. There will be no development if I cannot go abroad, I told her. She could not. I then started to convince my brother. After trying for a very long time, my brother finally realized the need for me to go. He raised the necessary money for my travel. He then requested my uncle to arrange the necessary things for me.

---

3. Of whom ten were unmarried, four were divorced, two were widowed and one was married.
Shanty, a widow who worked as a marketing researcher and whose brothers also held respectable jobs, said the following:

I went to my office and heard from one of my colleagues that so-and-so agency could get international visas that are good for women. My first cousin’s sister’s husband works at this office. I call him ‘brother’. I went directly to his office after my duty ended at 2 o’clock. I wanted to know more from my brother about the visa. Then my brother wanted to know what I intended to do with the visa. I told him that I would like to go bidesh. It had suddenly come into my mind when I heard about it. My brother also said it is a good visa. He also wanted to know why I wanted to go bidesh. He was not willing at all. He kept on saying that I had no business going abroad. But I said that I will go bidesh and for that I would like to face the interview. I gave him all the reasons. I explained that it would be good for me and my children’s future to go abroad and earn money. At last he consented. My brother helped me to convince the rest of my family. (...) Of course, they did not agree at first. Neither my mother and sister nor the sisters and brother of my husband agreed. It was my brother who convinced them and made them understand. He said: ‘How long will you [my family] be able to look after her given the situation she is in?’ He told them that I should be self-reliant, as it is my life and my future. ‘Don’t disturb her,’ he said. ‘Let her go.’ I could come here because my brother supported me.

Latifa, unmarried, whose sister was already working in Malaysia, reported:

I was inspired by seeing my sister. At first my father did not agree. He wanted me to marry. But my sister sent the money for my fee. She wrote to him and I talked to him. In this way, and because of my sister’s help, I somehow managed to get my family’s consent.

The above citations show that without prior consent and assistance from their allies, the migration of these women might not have come about. Gaining the support of an ally is not always easy. It took Rahana several months to convince her brother. Once he consented, though, things started happening. The same was true for Shanty. Although her ‘brother’ was not an immediate family member, he was well respected by the family (symbolic resources) and well connected due to his work (social and cultural resources). Nahar’s sister’s impact on familial decisions had increased through her economic contributions: she was paying the fee herself and her economic resources had increased her influence in the decision-making process.

Two other women had female allies (a sister and an aunt) in Malaysia. The remaining two women (one married, one unmarried) were backed by their mothers, who had some financial resources as well influence over their fathers. Ultimately, the fathers consented, although one did so grudgingly.

To obtain an ally’s consent, women drew on their symbolic capital and good relationships with the person in question, emphasizing their adherence to purdah. The arguments used to convince allies were generally economic in nature. The material
gain would often be very welcome to the household. The story of Marium, an unmarried woman, is illustrative. Her family had suffered economic shocks due to failed harvests. Selling land for his older daughters’ dowries had further strained the household resources. Marium wanted to go to bidesh. She stressed that:

I had asked my father to send me, as I saw many women were going. My father said, ‘No. What would people think?’ He tried to send my brother, but 120,000 takas were needed, and who would have worked the land had he gone? Father went to the bazaar. There, he met ‘uncle’ [an agent] and he heard that only 60,000 takas, including clothing, were needed to send me. Then father asked me if it was still my desire to go. How he finally came to agree that day I do not know. (...) My father said that people say so many bad things about women. There were no other women from our village going abroad, only me. My father told me: ‘You know, your grandfather is a munshi [religious man] and people will say there is no other woman from the whole village going abroad. Why should the daughter of the munshi be sent abroad and not the son?’ (...) He asked me: ‘What do you say? If you give me courage then I can allow everything.’ I told him that it is not my business what people say. I said: ‘If we did not have food for two to three days, would anyone come forward and provide food for us? No-one would. Would anyone?’ I said to my father: ‘So why listen to what others say?’ I gave him courage.

The fear most commonly expressed by family members was the negative impact the woman’s migration might have on the family’s honour and social standing. As in Marium’s case, the pressing economic need and sometimes the unaffordable fees for a son’s or husband’s migration were the dominant reasons women were granted permission to migrate. In the process, gendered boundaries were stretched. As seen in the previous chapter, other women’s households faced no immediate financial need. However, the economic argument was still used.

While opposition based on moral grounds was pronounced, money (whether truly needed or merely desired) seemed to counterbalance the honour considerations. It was believed that returning ‘rich’ would have a positive impact on the family’s status, and if the woman was unmarried, a better groom for the daughter could be found. As one woman stated: ‘Apa [sister], if you can give money, everybody will be happy.’ Or, as Farhana said: ‘The whole world is after money. With it, you can have everything. Nowadays, if you have money, you also have prestige.’

It can thus be seen that the increased monetization of social life has had a dual impact on gendered norms: it has a negative impact on women’s positions due to inflating dowry demands – which in themselves were direct or indirect reasons for migration – and, paradoxically, it has created a niche for women to stretch gendered boundaries and pursue personal goals, which also feature in women’s incentives to migrate.

For several of the divorced and unmarried women whose parents were not in immediate economic distress, guardians were not persuaded by the economic argu-
ments. They eventually consented in the face of the women’s determination, stubbornness and perseverance – individual traits that proved to be valuable resources.

In a few cases, the women had been more confrontational in their argumentation, quite contrary to the general image of obedience and the sociologically correct image painted by those quoted above. Azma, for example, whose planned marriage had been cancelled at the last minute, threatened to commit suicide. Her drama combined with the economic argument (i.e. her brothers would have more money for their business) and the help of her ally, a cousin brother, eventually culminated in consent.

In trying to obtain their fathers’ consent and assistance, several divorced women whose marriages had been painful explicitly mentioned the distress their fathers had inflicted by marrying them off to unsuitable and abusive grooms. Khadiza:

I was firm in my decision. I told him that because of your wish, I got married. Now it is my wish to go to bidesh, you should fulfil it. I put pressure on my family, and at last they agreed and gave me the money to come here.

Rokeya:

I told my father: ‘I have to take care of my life. I will never marry again. You did not give me an education; you married me to a bad man. I cannot stay there. I have to take care of my son’s future.’ In that way, I convinced them.

Both women asked their guardians to take their responsibility and their painful experiences into consideration, and where applicable (as in the case of Rokeya) also their financial need. However, even when immediate guardians had consented and assisted in a woman’s migration, the opposition from others in her own household or beyond had not necessarily ceased. After her father consented, Marium (see above) continued:

My father then asked my elder sister’s husband. He told him that he wanted to send Mosharaf [Marium’s elder brother] abroad but he could not, so now he had agreed to send me. My brother-in-law replied: ‘What can I say? If I say “no” then you would say that you could not send her because of me. If you think that it is all right, then I have no objection.’ He asked my sister, and she said the same. When I asked my second sister, she also gave the same answer. But my second sister’s husband did not agree at all. He told us that after going abroad, a woman has to ‘do so many works, it was bad’. He said this and that.

Being the patriarch of the family, Marium’s father – her ally – had decisive decision-making power. Family members who disagreed not only felt they could not speak in opposition to the ally’s wish, as they lacked the same decision-making power, but also did not want to be held responsible for missed economic opportunities. At times there was a very thin line between obtaining consent from others and bypassing opposition. Controversy often remained.
Secrecy and conflict

Ten of the women (two unmarried, two divorced, six married) had not tried to obtain the necessary consent but had circumvented the need for it. These women had expected strong opposition to their desired migration and had thus decided to arrange the money, visas and work permits themselves, generally with the help of outside contacts, before informing their families. Latifa, an unmarried woman and the eldest daughter in a family of five children, had set her mind on going abroad. Her father, a porter at a bank, was close to retirement. They owned a little plot of land on which their house was built. Her younger sister, Tasnema, recalled:

My sister was very clever. She got to know a woman near our house who knew about bidesh and could help her in obtaining a visa. She did not tell anybody but she started raising the money by borrowing it. She also asked my grandmother, but she did not give her anything. Can a woman really go to bidesh? She did not say anything to my parents. She managed to raise 20,000 takas, but it was not enough. When my mother saw that she was worried, she asked what was wrong. Then my sister told my parents. At first they did not believe her. They were shocked. In the meantime her visa arrived. My father eventually raised the rest of the money. He did not want her to go, but later my sister managed to get his consent. You know, my sister is just like my father: if she says she will do something, she somehow will. It started like that.

Nahar felt like an eldest ‘son’, as she explains it, since her brothers are much younger. She also wanted to do something for herself and not get married, at least not yet, as she had told her father, who was busy arranging her marriage. Latifa had activated a social network of her own. She had tapped into the migration institution by drawing on the help of a neighbour. She had capitalized on ‘weak ties’ by expanding on sources outside her immediate familial circle and using them as crucial resources (cf. Granovetter 1973; Portes 1998:12). Her father recounted to us how he had not liked the idea of her migrating at all but had had no choice other than to allow her. A determining reason was that a large sum had been spent on the visa, which otherwise would have been lost and needed to be repaid. Obviously, Nahar was strong-minded and determined, characteristics that proved essential in her endeavour. She was aware that she had upset her parents, but was convinced that her family would eventually benefit and that their social and economic standing would increase.

Three of the married women had conflictual relationships with their husbands and arranged their departure independently, as they knew their husbands would prevent them from going. Comla’s story is illustrative. She grew up at her uncle’s house in Dhaka. He was a lawyer. When she was about 15, her parents wanted to marry her off to a schoolmaster in the countryside. The uncle could not prevent this marriage from happening. Quarrels with her in-laws and husband had been rampant ever since she married. As she was from Dhaka, she explained, she had ‘different’ standards and ideas. She spoke up, which was not appreciated. When her husband refused to improve their living conditions, by for example, renovating their home and
building a brick toilet, their differences culminated in her leaving for bidesh to earn her own money: ‘They had not let me finish my education after my marriage, although they had promised. I felt I needed to do something for myself.’

Her husband tried to stop her by contacting the police and, unsuccessfully, pressing charges against her. Her uncle intervened on her behalf. The knowledge that her uncle would support her enabled her to be bold. The education she had received while living with her uncle, her self-confidence and her outspokenness further contributed to her determination to pursue her interests within the confines of her marriage.

Two married women had arranged the necessary papers to migrate via neighbours in the urban areas where they resided. They had good relationships with their husbands, but not unlike Nahar, feared they might not agree if they asked first. When confronted with the news that the migration papers had already been obtained and paid for, the husbands were upset but did not stop them from going. Again, the economic prospects eased the conflict.

Arranging things secretly was a common tactic used in the Dhaka neighbourhood that we visited frequently. Over the course of several weeks, we observed a married woman secretly arranging her departure. We also witnessed her failure. One afternoon, the agent had called on her to say that she should leave for the airport the following morning. That evening, however, the husband found out. He beat her and locked her up in the house. That was the end of her migration story. Although it was beyond the scope of our study to look into this issue, there appeared to be many women who had attempted to migrate but had failed to do so, as they had been stopped by guardians or had not been able to obtain the necessary financial support or appropriate working visas.

In short, the women who had migrated with conflict and/or in secrecy had generally managed to do so by drawing on their own social network, capitalizing on their social resources to tap into the migrant institution and to arrange money for the fees and visas.

The departure of many women was not without some degree of conflict. Even when immediate household members grudgingly agreed, other relatives often did not. Shazeda, a married woman, wanted to earn money to pay off the debts her husband had incurred as a result of his failed migration:

I came without telling my family. In fact, I only told one or two people I could trust. If my relatives had known, they might have stopped me from going. My brothers might have kidnapped me. After I came here, I wrote a letter to them. (...) In my father and husband’s family they still do not accept that I came here. They say bidesh means bad [dishonourable]. I have lost my status, they say. My community does not accept me, although I am good [honourable]. I am a woman and not a man, yet I came to bidesh. This may have a negative impact on my future and on my children’s marriage possibilities, my family told me after I arrived here.
As seen earlier, many relatives opposed female migration as it is regarded as dishonourable for women. For Shazeda – who is from a middle-class background and whose brothers were successful businessmen – and for some of the other women, class played a role: migration is regarded as even more dishonourable if the woman’s relatives have a good economic standing. Lower-class women go to work, not women whose families can provide for them – unless the women are ‘immoral’.

Opposition often came from far beyond the household realm. The majority of the women said that distant relatives and neighbours had opposed their migration and tried to discourage them from going. Many women had been accused of putting their family’s honour at risk. The experience of Taslima (an unmarried woman) is illustrative:

My uncle has a high-powered job in the government. He was very angry when he heard of my plans. He said that his honour would be severely affected if his niece were to go to bidesh. He even told me that when I came back, he would slap me with his shoes. I went anyway. He can say so many things, but will he help my family? No, he will not.

Relatives feared the loss of prestige and social standing (symbolic capital) that the migration of a female relative may cause them. Yet, as wryly remarked by several women, assistance to help someone finish her studies or obtain an alternative job in Bangladesh was never granted. Kabeer (2000:89) found in her study among garment workers in Dhaka similar patterns and reactions among women and their relatives. The women were not to be stopped. Hence their departure was frequently accompanied by conflict.

### 6.3 Tapping into the migrant institution

Many migrating women and men had relatives who had migrated before them, and their stories, together with those that came down the grapevine, had often been inspirational. Of the 139 women, 89 (64%) had relatives who had gone abroad prior to their departure. In 81 cases, the relatives were men; in 17 cases, they were both men and women; and in 8 cases, they were women. In 43 cases, they were family members of the same household, of whom 6 were women. Of the 60 male migrants interviewed in Malaysia, 71% had male relatives abroad. They were generally not of the same household. Only two men (both Hindus) had female relatives who had moved to India to marry. Most of the migrant relatives of both men and women had gone to the Middle East or Malaysia.

Most migrants in this study, however, had not actualized their migrations via these social networks but had relied on the migrant institution: the network of dalals (middlemen and agencies). As seen in Chapter 3, and as elsewhere in Asia, the situation in Bangladesh created a lucrative niche for entrepreneurs and organizations to specialize in providing passports and work documents and in bringing or smuggling people across borders.
Agents and middlemen had played a proactive role in contacting the first wave of Bangladeshi women who worked in overseas factories in the early 1990s. By the time the women in this study migrated, however, the grapevine had already done its work in advertising female migration. The women and their guardians mostly approached the agents.

Rokeya’s story is one example of how the migration institution is utilized:

One woman from the neighbouring village was in Malaysia for two years; she has a relative who is my neighbour. First, my sister-in-law went there to get information from them. They told my sister-in-law, yes, she can go to Malaysia – there is no problem. In the factory where she was working, all the workers were female, even the supervisor and the leader. Later, I visited her and talked to her. The agent lived in Kaligonj, which is not too far from where we live. That woman had gone through this agent. She gave me his address. One or two months later, after having thought it over some more, my brother, my sister-in-law, one of my cousin’s brothers and I visited him. He took us to the office in Dhaka. Then we talked to the agent directly. They told us it might take one week or maybe one or two months. If you can give us money quickly, then we can arrange things quickly. One week later they called me for an interview. The managers of a factory in Malaysia had come to Dhaka.

Social networks (personal contacts) were capitalized on to access the migrant institution. There was always a dalal in the vicinity, or someone who knew of one. Sometimes the conversations were preliminary and explorative; the respondent, guardian and/or ally had not been entirely persuaded. To reassure and convince the guardians, agents emphasized that factories would only employ women, that they would live in guarded hostels and that their counterparts would look after them ‘as if they were their own daughters’. They thus portrayed the working environment as an extension of the female domain, namely the private sphere (cf. Baud 1992). To make female migration acceptable, agents presented themselves as ‘fictive relatives’ or ‘guardians’ who would ensure the safety of the potential migrants. Eventually, if one had come to an agreement, middlemen or guardians brought the potential migrant to the recruitment office for interviews.

Rokeya had obtained the consent smoothly. Her case shows that guardians and other relatives often actively participated in the process: they contacted the agent and arranged all the necessary arrangements together. Women who were already living in Dhaka, particularly those who worked in factories, sometimes went with their girlfriends.

As for the interviews, a personnel manager of the Malaysia-based company would generally co-conduct the interviews with the agency’s personnel. In the case of garment companies, women were usually tested on their sewing skills. Several women had taken a one-month sewing course in order to pass the tests and be selected. For the electronics companies, women were commonly required to be able to speak a few words of English, write, do some simple maths and distinguish between several colours. In Rokeya’s words: ‘Those who could not do that were assisted by
those sitting next to them.’ This example shows that the interviews were sometimes a bit of a mockery: some women were illiterate, even though they passed literacy tests. Nevertheless, as other women repeatedly pointed out, many women went for the interviews and many were refused, mainly because of ill health or their lack of skills. As prescribed by Malaysian law, all women had to pass a medical test before receiving a contract.

Money

For the majority of the women we interviewed, the issue of raising money for the migration fee had not been perceived as the main obstacle: most had been certain that once they had permission or had made the arrangements, they would find the money. They had been prepared to take out interest-bearing loans, if necessary. Nevertheless, given the level of the fees, the investment was large and would weigh significantly on many households. The venture encompassed a very considerable financial risk, which obviously weighed in the decision making. Yet, it was also believed that the financial gains from employment abroad would be significant.

Depending on the agency and the operating middlemen, women and their families paid a partial instalment to the agents before the interview took place. With the help of allies or guardians, capital was mobilized, generally by combining several sources and relying on social and symbolic resources within the wider circle of relatives and moneylenders. Of the 139 women who participated in the survey, 5 had not been asked about the way the fee was paid. Five other women did not know how their guardians had paid for it, as they had not been involved. Of the 129 women who did know how the fee had been financed, 16 (12%) did not know the exact breakdown of the various sources, for example, how much of the fee was covered by selling land as compared to selling the goat. In those cases, averages were taken in order to compute the percentages shown in table 6.2. Many women stated that their allies or guardians had fully arranged these matters, while the women who had decided themselves and had already arranged part of the trip took a more proactive role in raising the financial means.

Of the 60 men who participated in the survey, 2 did not know how the fee was paid. As for the women, on average 46% of their fees had been covered by borrowing money, 26% by selling or leasing resources, and 26% by using own capital.

Table 6.2: Primary means by which the fee was financed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Means</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Borrowing money</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selling/mortgaging land, livestock and/or other items</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own capital (savings, pension money, gold)</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. According to the anecdotal stories told, it was not uncommon for 75% of those taking the interviews to be rejected.
Men, on the other hand, had drawn more on their own capital (45%) and borrowed less (25%) (see table 6.2). This reiterates the finding of Chapter 5 that male migrants generally came from more affluent backgrounds compared to women.\(^5\)

Table 6.3 shows the various sources of the money with which the fee was paid, as well as the number of people drawing on these sources. Although a relatively large percentage of women had invested their ‘own’ money, the amounts were substantially lower than the amounts invested by men. Relatively speaking, the men had sold more land, which partially reflects the fact that their families generally owned more land than did the women’s households.

**Table 6.3: Primary sources of financing fee (extended)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Women: average percentage of fee paid</th>
<th>Women who used this source (several sources were generally used simultaneously)</th>
<th>Men: average percentage of fee paid</th>
<th>Men who used this source (several sources were generally used simultaneously)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Own money (e.g. household’s savings, pension money, gold)</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>61 women (47% of all women)</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>33 men (58% of all men)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family/friends (interest-free loan)</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>49 women (38%)</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>15 men (27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money lender*</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>41 women (32%)</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>5 men (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sale of land</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>28 women (22%)</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>18 men (32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sale of trees and/or livestock</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>19 women (15%)</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2 men (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The agent (loan)</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>11 women (9%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family (interest-bearing loan)</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>15 women (12%)</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>5 men (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mortgage on land</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>10 women (7%)</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2 men (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sale of valuable items (e.g. transistor radio)</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>8 women (6%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>139 women</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>60 men</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*An interest rate of 10% was common.*

The migration fees varied among the women. On average, they had spent 54,740 takas to migrate. Of the women, 63% knew the additional costs involved.\(^6\) On ave-

---

5. It should also be noted that the men had generally spent substantially more on the fee.
6. The exchange rate in the summer of 1999, when the survey was held, was 1 taka = 2 euro cents.
rage, 8600 takas were spent on, for example, obtaining a passport, multiple trips to and from the agency in Dhaka and, in some cases, a training course. 7 Although the fees paid by the women employed by the various garment and electronics factories were strikingly similar, they differed over time. In the grapevine stories that the women regularly referred to, it had been said that women’s migration fees were much lower than those for men and came to 20,000-30,000 takas. These stories were based on the fees paid by the first wave of women leaving for overseas factories in the early 1990s. Although not as low as reported in the grapevine stories, it was found that women who left in 1993/4 on average paid much less than did those who left later: the former paid an average of 36,625 takas, while latter paid 54,667 takas or more (see table 6.4). As Salma Helena, a divorced woman who had been in Saudi Arabia in the early 1990s, recalled:

Agents ask so much money these days. They easily want 100,000 takas. When I went to Bahrain in 1991, we paid 20,000-25,000 takas. The agent now tells us that there are many problems these days. That is why they have to pay so much money. But they cheat and there is no contract.

Table 6.4: Women’s fee by time of departure for Malaysia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Months in Malaysia during survey, July 1999</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Mean fee per category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>32-39 months (March – Dec. ’96)</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>63,586</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49 months (June ‘95 - Feb. ’96)</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>63,060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59 months (Sept ‘94 - May ‘95)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>54,667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-69 months (Dec ‘93 - Aug. ‘94)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>35,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-79 months (March ‘93 - Nov. ’93)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>38,250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80-89 months (June ’92 - Feb. ’93)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>Unknown*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This woman did not know how much was paid; her husband had arranged everything. She was the only woman we spoke to who originally came on a tourist visa and obtained legal employment documents once she was in Malaysia.

The substantial increase in fees seems to be due to several factors: the intermittent stops on recruitment by the Malaysian authorities in 1994 and thereafter; and the fact that it had become harder to obtain visas and that the demand for those visas had increased. However, the fees paid varied across the women, even when considering differences in the time of departure. Once in Malaysia and working in the factories, many women noted that although they had arrived together via the same agency in Dhaka, the amount of money they paid differed substantially at times. There are no
fixed rates for middlemen and agents, and the differences reflect the arbitrariness of fees charged.

There was little logic to it, except that women who came from faraway villages and had relied more on the dalal had sometimes paid more. For men fees differed as well, the correlation between the time they arrived in Malaysia and the amount they paid to the agent was however weaker.  

A few other women who had close relatives working as agents or middlemen paid less. Several women mentioned that the recruiter was a distant relative; however, the fee charged was not necessarily lower. Nazma, an unmarried woman whose agent was a maternal uncle, said gloomily: ‘We gave 60,000 takas to my uncle for my journey to bidesh. But I do not know how much of this he kept for himself and how much he gave to the agency.’

Khadiza, who worked in the same factory as Nazma, had paid 42,000 takas (almost a third less than Nazma) to an agent she was related to. All of the women in her factory had arrived in 1996 and the average fee was 63,800 takas, virtually the same as the average fee during that time span. On the other hand, as late as 1996, Rahana paid only 30,000 takas, the lowest fee for that period. Her sister’s husband worked for the recruitment agency who hired her, and according to her, they did not want to make much profit out of her. The average fee paid by the other Bangladeshi women in her factory, all of whom had arrived in 1996, was 60,000 takas. Rahana’s case highlights the fact that the costs incurred for migration are far lower than what agents generally ask for.

Fees paid by the men were even higher. The average amount paid was 75,600 takas. The average additional costs were 9500 takas. At the time of the survey, the men had been in Malaysia for an average of 55 months, which was 12 months longer than the women. The relatively lower fees for women were generally believed to reflect the lower demand for visas for women. At least initially, the lower fee was an incentive for the women’s guardians to give their consent. It was found that for men, the average fee had not increased significantly over the years. The few (4) men who had paid only around 40,000 takas had initially arrived on tourist visas and arranged official papers after their arrival, either through legalization schemes or by ‘buying’ official documents. Three of them had arrived in the early 1990s. On the other hand, several (6) who had arrived during the early 1990s had paid 100,000 takas or more.

Another factor that drives up the migration costs is related to the loss incurred due to deceitful practices by agents and middlemen: 17% of the female and male migrants who participated in the survey had relatives who had lost money while trying to obtain an overseas work visa from an agent. The amount lost ranged from 25,000 to 330,000 takas, with an average of 93,000 takas. Approximately 5% of all migrants had lost money to an agent.

Amena, an unmarried woman, had initially planned to go to Kuwait to work as a clerk in a school while studying for a BA degree. The man who was supposed to

8. With few men in several of the categories, the sample was considered too small to give reliable information.
send her visa – a friend of a relative who worked in Kuwait – used her money to send a family member abroad. He was an informal contact and not a recruiter. She then decided to contact an agency in order to go to Malaysia, as she was determined to go to bidesh.

My cousin helped me. I gave the money via him [to the agent]. Three times they gave me a false date of departure. The agent informed me about the flight and in this way I was running after him for about three months. Instead of six women, that person sent six men to Kuala Lumpur. However, this was not fair. They took 60,000 takas from women and 160,000 takas from the men. It would have been better for me if I could have gone to that factory, because the wages are higher. So I was cheated twice, as the first time the man sent his niece to Kuwait instead of me utilizing my money, and now they sent men instead of me. Again, several months later, this agent to whom I had given money sent me to another office in Minar, to his brother-in-law, and this man was a genuine person. They would take 100 people from Bangladesh. I passed the interview and so I came to Malaysia.

All in all, she had lost 40,000 takas and spent several months waiting. Her story illustrates the randomness with which recruiters often operate, as well as migrants’ dependence on them. Due to her relatively high level of education, Amena had first pursued a perhaps non-existent office job in the Middle East. Virtually all the women were determined to work in factories; domestic work was generally not regarded as an option. Not all the women had set their minds on Malaysia; some had planned to go to the Middle East, as they had heard stories or received information from their recruiters. A few women had been in the process of going to the Middle East but were redirected to Malaysia.

Time

For the 47 women interviewed, it had generally taken 3.5 months to finalize everything with their agents. For several (6) it had taken 6 months, while a couple (2) had been able to leave within 2 weeks (this was largely a matter of sheer luck, as there happened to be a selection for a particular job when they had contacted the agent). A few (3) other women had been trying to migrate for as long as three years before they finally left for Malaysia. This was due to two factors: the initial mishandling by the agent and a temporary halt on female migration to Malaysia. Rahana, an unmarried woman, explained:

I went to an interview with another girl and we had to pay 50,000 takas, each of us paying 25,000 takas. I qualified in the interview and did the medical tests. After the medical tests, we were told that our flight departure would be next Thursday. We did shopping and got ready but the flight date was shifted. So we did not go to the airport. We found out later that they had sent someone else, using our money. We tried to find the agent but after a long search we failed in locating him. In this way, I lost 25,000 takas. Then my uncle and I contacted another agent. My uncle
used to come and inquire about me regularly since his niece had decided to go. My passport was ready when we heard that girls would be recruited for Malaysia. This was nine months later. Some lady gave me an interview and assured me that they would take me within three months. After that, going to Malaysia was stopped by the Malaysian government. Meanwhile, I had raised the necessary means by mortgaging land and taking out a loan. I held on to the money. I decided to go to Saudi Arabia instead and went for an interview. Out of 17 women interviewed, 3 were selected, including me. At the same time, the manager of my Malaysian company came to Dhaka again. I again sat for an interview. The process went faster: instead of going to Saudi Arabia I came to Malaysia. All in all, I spent 100,000 takas – which does not include the money that my brother had lost. It took me almost three years to get here.

Agencies themselves often do not know exactly when a clearance for visas may come in or when an employer may show up, which reflects the ad hoc and unprofessional organization of the sector. Ever-changing laws and visa regulations add to the obscurity of the process. The lack of transparency in the recruitment process, long periods of waiting and insecurity represent the reality many potential migrants face. In this study, the delays in the process seemed to have occurred for women more than for men. We witnessed how uncertainty, anxiety and stress affected their well-being and health, as many women and men we met in Bangladesh were in the midst of a recruitment process and were often in limbo for several months regarding their status. Perseverance and boldness were driving forces: having already paid and lost money, they felt that they had little choice but to push onwards. For many, the desire to migrate did not materialize at all or only at a much higher cost.

6.4 Conclusion

The qualitative data on the decision-making process confirm the finding of the previous chapter that most women played an active role in their migrations. While the decision-making process for most men seemed relatively straightforward, most women needed to strategize to make their desire to migrate happen, as their families often did not readily consent. Tapping into various resources made up for the lack of decision-making power most of them had due to their gendered and generational position within their households.

Drawing on their symbolic resources, many women capitalized on the confidence and faith that influential family members or relatives had in them. Due to their financial contributions (economic capital) as working members of their households, some women’s decision-making power and social standing (symbolic and cultural/human resources) had increased, which made it relatively easy to obtain consent. Others had decided not to seek approval and drew on social resources outside the household. They took the risk of conflict and disapproval, yet knew that they were supported by other relatives (i.e. having a favourable fallback position or expecting household members to accept their endeavours based on ties of affection and envisioned
economic gain), which would also improve the woman’s fallback position. Most women drew on personal traits such as strong determination, persistence, stubbornness and perseverance, which were crucial assets and had ultimately paid off. The power of these individual traits (human resources, as discussed in Chapter 2) cannot be underestimated.

As discussed in the previous chapter, women’s motivations for migration were diverse and often included familial as well as urgent personal motivations. However, the reason ‘doing it for the benefit of the family’ was mobilized to obtain approval and the consent of guardians and allies. Fathers, husbands and brothers often regarded the women’s migration as a family investment and thus were willing to raise money to cover the expenses (cf. Siddiqui 2001:45).

Women in this study were found to be much more proactive in their migration than the literature often suggests (cf. Curran & Saguy 2001:57; Oishi 2005). Looking beyond the surface of superficial argumentation, it becomes clear that by creating and carefully drawing upon resources, people acquire the capacity to take action and change undesired situations. Many Bangladeshi women had left their country despite hesitations and objections from family members and some level of conflict. In other words, the assumption that women are often sent or persuaded to migrate for the benefit of the household, which is related to their lack of power within the household (cf. Chant 1992; Yeoh & Huang 2000; Chantavanich 2001; Arya & Roy 2006), does not hold for the majority of Bangladeshi women who went to work in Malaysia. On the contrary, endeavouring to better their own as well as their family’s circumstances by crossing cultural constraints and stretching gendered boundaries, the women took crucial steps to ensure a future with an enhanced scope to make personal decisions. While looking at women who against all odds took up jobs in Bangladesh’s garment industry, Kabeer (2000:189) 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 through which access to waged employment is translated into an impact on women’s lives’. This is also the case for most women who strategized to go and work in bidesh

In order to actualize their migration, many aspiring migrants rely on recruitment networks and middlemen. The profit-based Bangladeshi migrant institution is characterized by informality, insecurity and non-transparency, and engages in processes for both documented and undocumented labour migration. An adequate governmental infrastructure to verify the credibility of recruitment agencies’ information is lacking. Recruitment agents are accountable to no-one (Siddiqui 2003). Potential migrants generally lack the power, time, contacts, skills and money to access reliable information, or to verify the information given (Massey et al. 1993; Goss & Lindquist 1995:344; Rudnick 1996; Spaan 1999:24; Kofman et al. 2000:31). Although potential migrants are generally aware that they may be taking a risk by relying on a recruiter or middleman, they generally perceive that there is little alternative. They

---

try to reduce the risk by going to those they already know and who are therefore less likely to disappear with their money. Although several had been deceived initially, many women and men said they trusted their agents and the information provided. How this worked out once the migrants were in Malaysia is the subject of the following chapter.
CHAPTER 7: WORKING IN MALAYSIA’S EXPORT INDUSTRY: CONDITIONS AND WAGES

This chapter looks at the migrant labour regime in Malaysia. Wages and working conditions are discussed, as are the contractual arrangements and promises made to workers. The discussion focuses on conditions at the company level, the level of the global political economy and the state level. The latter part of the chapter looks into the ways migrants approach or change their working situation. Although it would have been instructive to speak with managers, the tenseness of the situation did not allow us to do so. The trust and confidence we had established with the migrants in what was regarded to be a rather precarious context, and the fear and vulnerability many migrant women felt, made it ethically imperative to refrain from contacting management.

7.1 Companies

The Bangladeshi migrant women and men in this study worked in factories that are primarily oriented towards the export market; they predominantly produce garments, electronics or furniture. Of the women who took part in the survey, 122 (87%) worked in four big companies: two electronics and two garments firms. Three of these companies are transnational corporations (TNCs) based in Hong Kong, Japan and Germany, respectively. The fourth was a locally owned electronics company, catering to the export market (see table 6.1). Of the men interviewed, 27% were working in a garment TNC (factory III in table 6.1). 24% in one of three locally owned electronics factories and 20% in an American-owned porcelain factory. Several (13%) of the remaining Bangladeshi women also worked in one of these factories. The remainder of the migrants (mainly Bangladeshi men) worked in 10 other factories that made garments, furniture or electronics.¹ A few of these were owned by Hong Kong or Taiwanese based companies, while the rest were locally owned. The latter included a small business that employed fewer than 20 workers, of whom 6 were Bangladeshi. The analysis of working conditions and payments in this chapter is largely based on the main companies involved; reference is made to other companies only when the situation differs importantly.

¹ It should be noted that migrants working in electronics factories, although also employed by multinational corporations, were not hired by the world’s leading electronics companies that are based in Malaysia. These companies often preferred to hire local workers. For example, Intel – a world-leading US-owned electronics’ company with a factory in Penang – had a policy of not hiring migrant workers. An Intel executive told me that this was related to their long-term investment in their employees; giving training to workers who would leave within a couple of years was not lucrative. Intel’s labour policy was not based on cheap labour, but on skilled labour. Moreover, since this policy included higher wages, labour shortages were less of a problem.
### Table 7.1: Companies employing Bangladeshi women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factory</th>
<th>Products</th>
<th>Ownership</th>
<th>Total number of Bangladeshi workers upon our arrival in 1996</th>
<th>Bangladeshi women who took part in the survey</th>
<th>Approximate total number of workers at the time of the survey in 1999</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factory I</td>
<td>Electronics components</td>
<td>Japanese TNC</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>36 women (26%)*</td>
<td>500 local workers 200 Indon. women 54 Bangladeshi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory II</td>
<td>Electronics components + consumer electronics</td>
<td>Malaysian TNC</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>23 women (16%)</td>
<td>300 Malaysian workers 50 Indon. women 34 Bangl. women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory III</td>
<td>Branded high-quality garments</td>
<td>Hong Kong TNC</td>
<td>400 women 100 men</td>
<td>45 women (32%)</td>
<td>1500 Malaysian workers 400 Indon. women 110 Bangl. women 70 Bangl. men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory IV</td>
<td>High-quality women’s underwear</td>
<td>German TNC</td>
<td>200 women</td>
<td>18 women (13%)</td>
<td>900 Malaysian workers 150 Indon. women 38 Bangl. women</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentage of total number of women who participated in the survey. 122 (87%) of the 139 women worked in one of these four factories.*

### 7.2 Factors affecting employment conditions

The recruitment agencies and personnel managers who came to Bangladesh had given potential migrants a description of the work they would do and the wages they would earn. Contracts were signed before departure. Upon arrival in Malaysia, it turned out that wages were lower than promised in virtually all of the companies. The discrepancy between promises and actual wages varied. There were many underlying reasons for this.

In the next section, a closer look is taken at the actors involved and dynamics that contributed to the aforementioned discrepancies. These span different levels: the level of the company, the level of the global economy and the state level.
Table 7.2: Average net monthly earnings after deductions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factory I</th>
<th>Factory II</th>
<th>Factory III</th>
<th>Factory IV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>509 ringgits²</td>
<td>341 ringgits</td>
<td>781 ringgits</td>
<td>584 ringgits</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Company level*

The recruitment process

The companies employing the migrants in this study had obtained official work permits for all their foreign workers. The majority of the workers were still working in the company they were hired for when they first arrived in Malaysia. Thirteen (22%) of the men had changed jobs over the years. Seven men had arrived in Malaysia on tourist visas or were smuggled into the country as they had no work permits. All had obtained official papers with the help of their new employers and agents. Of the women who participated in the survey, only one had arrived on a tourist visa. 16 (11%) had changed jobs during their stay in Malaysia.

It is in the interest of recruiters to paint lucrative images of jobs and wages in Malaysia. However, upon arrival, some of the migrants had found themselves in factories other than the ones they believed they had been recruited for. They had taken training in garment production or were experienced sewers, but were actually hired by an electronics company. Others had been told they would be working in a knitting factory making socks, but ended up painting dolls in a ceramics TNC. No explanations were given, and these mix-ups appeared to be indicative of the non-transparent relationships between recruiters and employers.

Companies hire Bangladeshi recruiters who reside in Malaysia; mostly these are men who have been migrant workers themselves. These recruitment agents put the companies in touch with recruitment agencies in Bangladesh. Employers obtain working permits from the Malaysian authorities, while the Bangladeshi recruiters obtain the necessary papers from the High Commission and authorities in Bangladesh. With increasing numbers of Bangladeshis interested in working in Malaysia and more restrictive immigration policies for Bangladeshis enacted by the Malaysian government, fees and the number of cases of deception rose during the 1990s. As one Bangladeshi agent in Malaysia said:

In the early 1990s, employers approached me and said, ‘If you get me some workers from Bangladesh, you get 200 ringgits.’ Later it changed. Now a Bangladeshi agent approaches an employer and says: ‘I’ll give you a couple of thousand ringgits if you take a Bengali from me.’

---

2. The exchange rate in the summer of 1999, when the survey was held, was 1 ringgit = 25 euro cents.
Factory III experienced a major irregularity in recruitment. In 1993, this transnational company (which produces branded garments) had hired a small group of Bangladeshi female sewers who had extensive experience working as sewers in Dhaka’s garment factories. When I interviewed a manager of this company for a previous study in 1994, he expressed the company’s great satisfaction with the performance of these workers. In 1995/6, approximately 500 new migrants from Bangladesh were recruited, of whom 400 were women. However, within a few months many were sent back home and many others had absconded in order to escape a similar fate. Based on the stories told by workers, an agent and a unionist, the reasons seemed twofold: too many workers were hired and many sewers performed unsatisfactorily. The company had allegedly wanted only 300 migrants but had received more. A joint collaboration between a Bangladeshi agent and a personnel manager who had received a bribe (an extra payment for each migrant hired) had led to malpractice in recruitment. The personnel manager eventually lost his job, as did many of the migrants. The workers who were sent home had contracts, but were not reimbursed for the costs they had incurred. Fear was omnipresent: no one knew who might be sent back or when. Company representatives were reported to have come during the early evenings to the women’s houses, naming workers who had to leave and giving them 15 minutes to pack their belongings. Several women were said to have fled via the windows when they had been sent to their rooms to pack their bags, leaving their belongings behind. Estimates of the number of women who were sent back vary from 75 to 120, with at least another 100 having fled out of fear of being next. Since adequate surveillance of recruitment procedures is lacking at both the sending and the receiving end, there is frequent corruption and misinformation.

Contracts and wages

Most migrants had signed employment contracts, most of which had been issued by the human resource managers who had interviewed them in Dhaka. In three of the four main companies where women were employed, contracts were said to have been broken.

The women in factory I (a Japanese owned multinational that produces electronic appliances) had received a 4-page contract to be signed before departure. Fatima:

I read it and signed the contract. I could understand it all. They told us that if we worked overtime, we would make more money. There were men who explained it to those who could not understand. We would work in an electronics company. But they could not tell us what exactly our jobs would be. The contract was for two years and could be prolonged on a yearly basis.

According to the contract, the initial monthly wage of 310 ringgits would increase annually by 10%. However, no increase was given in the first three years. In the fourth year, the monthly wage was raised to 365 ringgits. At times, allowances were cut for no reason and pay slips did not always reflect the actual hours worked, especially the overtime hours – which were not adequately recompensed. According to
Malaysian labour law, overtime pay should be one and a half times the regular hourly rate on weekdays, twice the regular rate at weekends and three times the basic rate on public holidays. This law was violated in factory I. On weekdays, the rate paid was even lower than the regular hourly rates. The payments of Bangladeshi workers also seemed to differ from the payments of Malaysian workers, who had reportedly received strict orders from the manager not to show their pay slips to the Bangladeshi women. Malay workers with whom the Bangladeshi women were on friendly terms were found to receive more. For example, one local woman’s basic wage was 650 ringgits; she had been working at this particular factory for six years and had received annual increments. A supervisor who was aware of the unjust payments had tried to interfere, but her attempts were futile. The women’s own questions about the payments were generally countered with threats. Ferdousi: ‘If we ask, the boss gets angry and says that the computer never lies. If we are not happy, we should go home.’

Factory II (a Malay-owned company that produces electrical goods for the export market) paid its foreign workers 14.5 ringgits a day (approximately 320 ringgits a month). Each year there was an annual increase. After 3.5 years they earned 19.10 ringgits a day (about 450 ringgits a month). There were no complaints that Malaysian workers were earning higher rates. However, there had been other breaches of contract. Rahana:

I signed the contract a day before I came here. After we arrived, the madam [supervisor] took our passport and contract forms. I cannot read, but those who could read said that our contract said that our accommodation and everything else would be free. Our basic pay would be 400 ringgits. We would get overtime. We did not get that, but we were unable to negotiate due to the lack of the contract document as proof. Everything is with them, including the passport.

The original contract – which was purportedly signed on behalf of the personnel manager – stated higher wages than did the contract they were made to sign upon arrival. Although the new contract included an annual bonus (an extra month’s wage), which most companies did not provide to their migrant workers, sometimes neither they nor the Malaysian workers were paid their monthly wages: after their first year (i.e. from 1997 onwards), there was ‘no work available’ for between 6 and 12 weeks a year. During these periods, the women were paid 60-80 ringgits a month. As one of the women said: ‘During these months we have to live off our savings.’

The Bangladeshi women who worked as sewers in factory III – an established Hong Kong-based TNC producing branded garments – were paid according to the piecework system and in line with their Malaysian colleagues. The terms of the contracts were respected as far as payments were concerned. However, many women’s contracts had been breached, as discussed above, following the malpractice in recruitment. They were sent home a few months after their arrival without being reimbursed. The company also deducted a monthly sum of 80 ringgits from each Bangladeshi’s wage to pay for the costs incurred by the agent, it was said.
However, the workers had already paid their agents before departure, and they fought this ruling. Those who were still there eventually had their money returned.

The situation was somewhat different for the Bangladeshi men who worked in factory III. They worked as ironers, packers or quality controllers and earned fixed wages. The contracts they had signed in Bangladesh stated that their basic rate would be 12.50 ringgits a day, yet they received only 10.30 ringgits. Pointing at the original contract, Abdul said:

> We showed them the contract, we told them: ‘Look at the heading of this paper, it is your company’s logo and here is the signature of your personnel manager. It is real.’ They did not do anything about it, but simply told us that the personnel manager at the time was no longer working there.

The migrants continued pressing for their rights. This culminated in a strike and ended successfully for most migrants. After nine months they received the payments as stated in their original contracts, albeit not retroactively. The leaders of the strike, however, were sent home.

Factory IV – a garment TNC based in Germany – paid a basic wage to its workers instead of applying the piecework system as is common in the garment industry. As in factory II, the basic rate was 14.5 ringgits a day during the first year; after five years it had increased to 21.8 ringgits a day. Their payments were in line with the payments of Malaysian and Indonesian workers. As far as the contract was concerned, the women did not pay much attention to it: it was in English, and they could not understand it. Having signed a contract before departure did not always imply that it had been properly understood before it was signed. Sometimes the migrants received the contract only the day before their departure. Language was frequently a problem, and many relied on the oral explanations of managers and agents. At the recruitment office in Dhaka, it had been promised that they would earn the equivalent of 10,000 takas, but it turned out to be much less. In contrast to migrants in the other factories, the women in factory IV had nevertheless felt taken care of, as they had an ally on the management side (the personnel manager was of Bangladeshi origin). According to the women, things had been okay as long as he worked for the company. He had helped the workers as much as he could, primarily by making sure they had overtime work.

Similar trends were discerned in the other companies that employed Bangladeshi men and women: the terms of the contracts were often not met. Annual raises were frequently lower than stated and allowances were cut randomly. The payment records of smaller, local companies were often worse than those of the large TNCs. In several smaller companies, pay rises depended on the personal preference of the owner for individual workers and were rather random. In one small company in which two women who had absconded from factory III (because they feared being sent home) had found employment, wages had not been paid for several months. This finding is in line with reports by Tenaganita – an NGO that runs a case management programme for migrant workers in cooperation with lawyers. The majority of labour violations in the industrial sector are found in small and medium-size indu-
stries (Fernandez 2005). The TNCs were modern, air-conditioned, and rules and regulations on protection were strict and generally applied. The work environment was frequently quite different from the garment factories some women had worked at in Bangladesh and were generally appreciated. In contrast, workers in small factories were often exposed to toxins, dust and heat.

Although it is sometimes stated that female and male workers are not always paid the same in Malaysia’s export industry (cf. Caspersz 1998; Bhopal & Rowley 2005), it was not found to be the case in this study. Whenever Bangladeshi women and men performed the same tasks, they were paid equally. According to a representative of the Penang Textile Workers Union, wage rates for men and women are the same nowadays. Although most Bangladeshi women did not work in the same companies or departments as the Bangladeshi men, men and women who held the same positions did not report receiving different treatment because of their gender. However, they did believe they were treated and paid differently from Malaysian workers, as is discussed later.

Sukamdi (2001:100), who studied the working experiences of migrant women originating from Indonesia, argues that many of the difficulties and vulnerabilities that migrants face stem from contracts that are generally signed only by the agent and the migrant, and not by the employer in the receiving country. The findings presented here show that even when migrants hold official contracts with the company, their fair treatment is not guaranteed. Chand (2004:23), who studied garment factories in American Samoa that employed Vietnamese migrant workers, came to similar conclusions. Having a contract is not in itself enough to guarantee being paid fairly. The actual scope to seek and find legal redress is a determining variable in workers’ treatment.

Overtime

In global export-producing industries, overtime work often supplements meagre earnings.

Many factories in Malaysia relied on regular overtime work. Although overtime was not specified in contracts, agents and personnel managers had assured prospective migrants of abundant possibilities for overtime work. Promises of overtime had been instrumental in boosting relatively unattractive regular wages and had been included in the migrants’ calculations. Sharif (factory III):

I would like to work all the time. If I do not work I feel that I am losing money. With the help of my family, I have paid so much to come here, so I really have to work. If I do not work for a day, it is a lost day. I can’t just not work; this is not my own time. If I do not work in Bangladesh for a day, it is my own time and no

---

problem. Now I should work as much as I can. When I get back, I can rest for a year, no problem. Now, if I rest I will lose time and money.

Whenever Bangladeshi migrant workers from different factories in Malaysia met for the first time, the inevitable question would be: ‘Do you have OT [overtime] in your factory?’ This exemplifies the pivotal role that overtime played in their lives. For many Bangladeshi migrants, the lack of overtime bothered them the most as far as their jobs were concerned; wage rates were not expected to be changed. Working overtime enhanced their feeling of being in charge, of being in control of what was earned; if they worked more, they earned more. Gandhi and Shah (2002:180) found that workers in India held similar perceptions; however, this freedom or sense of being in charge was largely illusionary. Overtime was either available or it was not, and individuals were often not free to choose. Moreover, since many migrants’ wages were lower than envisioned, working overtime became even more essential. Most workers felt that they had to work as much overtime as they could to boost their income (Kassim 2001a:129). After expenditures for daily living, the wages derived from the regular 48-hour working week hardly allowed them to save to pay back the initial investment they had made.

However, many factories turned out to have less overtime available than had been promised. In the main factories where most of the women were working, three of the four factories did not provide overtime to the extent that was promised or did not pay in accordance with Malaysian labour laws. In factory I, all the women (apart from five women who worked in a department where there was no overtime work) worked a minimum of 2.5 hours of overtime every day and often also worked overtime during the weekends. Depending on shift schedules, there were sometimes only a few hours free between two working days. As seen earlier, official overtime rates as stipulated by law were not paid in this factory: the women earned 100-150 ringgits a month less overtime pay than they were entitled to. Malaysian labour law stipulates a maximum of 12 hours overtime a week, and work weeks are not to exceed 60 hours in total (in order to protect the workers’ health). Like some other companies, factory I did not observe this law, nor did their Bangladeshi workers want them to.

In factory II, women had had regular overtime work during their first year in Malaysia. In their second year, there had been significantly less. Subsequently, there had been virtually no overtime work. Due to the lack of overtime, the women in this factory earned the lowest wages of all the Bangladeshi women we met and were the unhappiest with their working situation: little money could be saved. The women in factory II tried to reduce their living costs, which was rather obvious from their appearance: they looked thinner than the women working in other factories. Rahana (factory II):

4. Their basic wages were only 280 ringgits a month.
5. The men working in the American porcelain factory were in a similar situation; they too had very low wages because they had no overtime work.
We were told that there would be work in the factory and we would get overtime, even extra night-duty. They said that there is so much work that it would be hard to refuse to do overtime. We were prepared to work hard because then we would earn. But what they said was only partly true. What the madam promised about OT when she came to Bangladesh is not true. They promised us that we would earn 12,000 takas, but because of the lack of overtime it is only 5000 takas. During the week we are back home by six o’clock. Every weekend we just sit around; there is no work for us. I did not come to Malaysia to sit idle. As a woman I have left my house, and threw my veil away, only to earn money. Now I am sitting here and there is no work. I cannot save. I have not been able to do anything for my family. I lost out, both here and at home.

Rahana was referring to what was on the minds of many women: their honour. As seen in the previous chapter, many had to convince their family of the benefits of their migration. Their financial success would prove that it had been the right decision. They wondered how they would be regarded after returning home if their stay abroad turned out to be financially unproductive. Women in this company felt deceived and called themselves ‘unlucky’. After almost four years in Malaysia, some had only just been able to pay off the debts they had incurred to pay their migration fees. Most of the women wanted to swap places with the women in factory I: although they were not paid fairly, at least they had overtime and at the end of the month they had more money in their accounts. Factory III had overtime yet it varied by department. Rubya:

The volume of production depends on the section; some sections have much, others don’t. If they have much production, they also have some OT. Sometimes overtime also depends on the supervisor: she will always prefer to give overtime to those she likes.

Bangladeshi men who worked as ironers or quality controllers had less overtime than most sewers. Since overtime was very popular, a woman’s relationship with the supervisor who allocated the work was of importance. A similar situation was found in factory IV. The women had worked overtime during the first three years of their stay. After the Bengali personnel manager left the company, overtime hours had been reduced. This reduction, however, seemed to coincide with the hiring of more (Indonesian) migrant workers and a decreasing need for overtime work. In most of the other factories, the stories were very similar: overtime was neither given nor recompensed as promised.

The question arises whether the managers had blatantly exaggerated the availability of overtime or whether its availability had decreased. Both aspects seem to have played a role. During the mid 1990s, when employers were looking for foreign workers to fill their shortages, overtime was readily available in many companies. While giving overtime work can be lucrative when labour is scarce, as well as during times when production is exceptionally large, it becomes an expensive tool if applied in the long term. In addition, for some garment companies, pressure from consumer
groups has increased and some brands have become increasingly strict concerning ‘exploitatively’ long working hours (Smakman 2004).

In short, many companies looked for ways to reduce labour costs. Hiring more foreign workers was one way of doing so, as was the case in factory IV. In some factories, overtime had dwindled because production had gone down. The reasons varied. Several companies increasingly shifted part of their production to lower-income countries in the region and overtime was cut back. Some electronics companies were affected by lower demands in the electronics and electrical sector, while others had been affected by the Asian economic crisis (personal communication with a senior adviser of the state industrial development corporation, September 2000). For whatever reason or reasons there was less overtime, managers and agents alike had promised overtime too easily, while prospective migrants might have taken their words too seriously.

Not surprisingly, overtime often became a tool of power, a source of jealousy and a means of dividing workers. Being favoured by a supervisor was frequently equated with working diligently and obediently. To remain favoured, and hence to continue to obtain overtime work, sometimes meant having to compromise on one’s own needs. Kamal (electrical appliances factory):

My shift is from 8 to 8. That entails 3 hours of OT, if they then ask me to continue till 10 at night, it is too much for me, I am too tired. But I cannot refuse. If I tell my boss I cannot do the extra hours, he may stop my overtime for many days or even suspend me for a couple of days.

In a study among Taiwanese companies in Malaysia, a manager told Kung & Wang (2006:588):

Do you know how low their basic wage is? Only ten-something ringgit. If they do overtime work, they can get thirteen hundred or more a month. If they do not conform, they will get no overtime work, and their monthly wage will only be about four hundred. How could they survive with little money to pay their living cost, and the debt they have at home for coming overseas? I don’t fire them, or send them back. After one or two months, they will come to me and ask for more work to do. They will show their obedience to me.

Workers’ dependence on their jobs in general and on overtime work more specifically was frequently used as a threat to prevent workers from being non-compliant or to retaliate for behaviour that was regarded as ‘deviant’.

In sum, many workers did not obtain all the remunerations specified in their contracts. While this was sometimes at least partially due to mishandling by recruitment agencies, many companies failed to take full responsibility for the contracts signed on behalf of their human resource managers in Dhaka. Part of the disappointment over remunerations was based on migrant workers’ high expectations regarding overtime – verbal promises that were taken as facts.
The Asian economic crisis that started in Thailand in mid 1997 affected Malaysia’s economy. Foreign workers were found to be hit the hardest by the crisis (Yusof 2001). According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB News Release 18-06-1999): ‘With little or no legislation to protect them, many were sent home to make way for newly unemployed Malaysians.’ Although only a few of the migrants in this study had lost their jobs, all of them had been affected by the crisis in at least three different ways, namely by a sharp deterioration in the exchange rate; employers’ measures to reduce costs and a decline in production; and a substantial, inflation-driven increase in the cost of living.

Falling exchange rates

The exchange rate was stable at 1 ringgit to 16-17 takas in the years prior to the financial crisis. As the ringgit plunged as a consequence of the economic crisis, the exchange rate between the two currencies deteriorated dramatically (see table 7.3). By January 1998, 1 ringgit was worth only 10.5 takas – a drop of 36%. The Bangladeshis who lost their jobs as a consequence of the economic crisis and were sent home, saw their savings reduced by more than a third.

Early in 1998, the exchange rate stabilized at around 12 takas, due to the pegging of the Malaysian ringgit to the US dollar (at 3.80 ringgits to 1 US dollar). It remained low until 2002.

The significant decrease in exchange rates created anxiety among the Bangladeshi community. At the time, no one knew when or how fast it would improve, if at all. When possible, some migrants postponed sending money home and waited for a better exchange rate. Others feared it would plunge even more. As one of the women said: ‘Apa, it is madness: today the rate can be up, and tomorrow it can be down again!’ Rates did not improve significantly and many had to send money home as their families needed or expected it. Many Bangladeshis considered their ‘real wages’ to be their earnings after they had been converted into takas, as the money would largely be spent in Bangladesh rather than Malaysia. Shannaz (factory II):

They told us we would make 10,000 to 13,000 takas a month. In the beginning that was correct – we made 10,000. At that time the exchange rate was good, nowadays it is bad and 10,000 takas salary is a dream.

Factors affecting employment conditions

The respondents in this study were chosen because they had jobs in industrial companies. However, several men we met formally as well as informally had lost their jobs in the aftermath of the crisis; they had found new jobs elsewhere, obtaining papers from agents with connections, for which on average 2200-3000 ringgits were paid.
### Table 7.3: Value of the Malaysian ringgit in Bangladeshi takas (interbank rate)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Bangladeshi takas</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Bangladeshi takas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>May 1998</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>June 1998</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan.-June 1997</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1997</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>January-June 1999</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 1997</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>July-December 1999</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 1997</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 1997</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>January-June 2000</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 1997</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>July-December 2000</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 1997</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(July-Dec.) 1997</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 1998</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 1998</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1998</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 1998</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>19.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In 1996/7, when the exchange rate was around 16.5 takas to 1 ringgit, one had to earn 607 ringgit to have 10,000 takas — a sum that those who worked a substantial amount of overtime were able to earn. In 1998, when the exchange rate was down to 12 takas, they had to earn 834 ringgits in order to have 10,000 takas, and that was beyond the reach of many.

Taking the average exchange rate of 1995, 1996, and the first half of 1997 as a reference point for the average exchange rate before the crisis — that is, 16.5 takas to 1 ringgit — the value of Bangladeshi workers’ income converted to takas had on average decreased by 18% over the first four years following the financial crisis. By the end of 2002, the exchange rate was almost back to its pre-crisis value of 16 takas to 1 ringgit. By then, however, the vast majority of migrants in this study had left the country, as their work contracts had expired.

The economic crisis and the subsequent decreasing value of the Malaysian ringgit had somewhat different implications for Indonesian migrant workers. Since the Indonesian rupiah had plunged considerably more than the Malaysian ringgit, Indonesian migrant workers were effectively sending more home than they were before the crisis in 1997 was 27%, in 1999 21%, in 2000 16% and 9% in 2001.

---

7. In 1998, the decrease in earnings converted to takas at the current exchange rate compared to the exchange rate prior to the start of the crisis in 1997 was 27%, in 1999 21%, in 2000 16% and 9% in 2001.
However, the rate of inflation in Indonesia was tremendous during these years (reaching 430% in 2002).

Effects on companies

Many companies felt the impact of the region’s economic malaise. Some witnessed a decrease in production, and hence in overtime, while others tried to cut their costs in the face of prospects that now were less bright. For the electronics sector, the crisis coincided with a worldwide stagnation in the electronics market. Companies downsized, diversified and increased their exposure to export markets; redundant workers were dismissed. The threat of dismissal was increasingly used as a disciplinary measure.

However, not all companies suffered from the crisis. Some utilized the public acceptance of hard times in order to restructure. In the garment sector, for example, the fall in exchange rates had made Malaysian apparel relatively cheaper and thus more competitive (TWR June 1998; Ford 2002; personal communications with senior adviser Industrial Development Corporation). The crisis played an important role in wage deductions and cuts, as experienced by many migrants. In factory I, migrants saw deductions on their monthly pay slips: allowances had been cut and overtime hours were not properly paid. In several of the other factories, wage raises were provided only arbitrarily. Many workers experienced a drop in overtime work. Overtime dwindled in factory II and in the porcelain factory, where many male respondents were employed. Faruk: ‘The conditions here are very poor, especially after the economic downturn [crisis]. Our overtime stopped. Now, the factory tries to increase quality, but we do not know whether that will lead to more overtime.’

Economists have long argued that if Malaysia were to improve the quality of its products – that is, produce higher value-added products – its competitive edge would improve and its reliance on labour would decrease (cf. Rasiah 2001). In this scenario, overtime would likely not increase. Malaysia’s largely labour-intensive industry has not found it necessary to up-scale production processes or to improve labour efficiency by investing in training. Many companies’ prescriptions for increasing competitiveness involve increasing their right to manage labour, thereby reducing labour costs even further (Todd, Lansbury & Davis 2004:8). This scenario seemed to occur in most of the companies that relied on migrant workers.

Increase in the cost of living

Many of the Southeast Asian countries that were hit by the economic crisis witnessed high inflation rates and increases in the cost of living. In Malaysia, food prices

---

8. In 1995 and 1996 the exchange rate between the Malaysian ringgit and Indonesian rupiah had been around 900 rupiah for 1 ringgit. In 1997 it went up to 1017; in 1998 to 2616; and in 1999 it was 2073 rupiah for 1 ringgit on average.
9. The food price index for Indonesia shows that between 1995 and 2000, prices for food increased by 273% (World Bank 2002).
rose by 9% in 1998 (ADB 1999). The consumer food price index indicated a 28% increase in the price for food between 1995 and 2000 (World Bank 2002; UNE-SCAP 2004). In line with this statistic, many migrants remarked that their daily expenditures had increased by 25-35%. Kamal (electronics factory):

The costs of commodities have increased. Before, we would not spend more than 150 ringgits a month. Now we spend about 200 ringgits a month. But the men who smoke might spend 300 ringgits. It is not only us who are unhappy; the local people are unhappy about this too. But they do not protest – there are no demonstrations or slogans. They keep it to themselves. In Bangladesh, everybody would protest.

The cost of living was widely claimed to have increased considerably, which further affected the migrants’ ability to save money. Migrants often complained about the increase in the cost of living and were surprised about its quiet acceptance by Malaysian citizens. The crisis affected migrant workers and Malaysian workers differently. Like the Malaysian workers, the migrants had to pay more for their daily requirements, but in addition the money they sent to Bangladesh was worth less.

The state level: equal rights for migrant and local workers?

In 1991, the Malaysian government amended the labour law to ensure equal wages and benefits for Malaysian and migrant workers. In the same year, the government announced that employers were to pay an annual levy for each foreign worker hired. The objective of both laws was to ensure that foreign labour was not used as a substitute for Malaysian labour (Appleyard et al. 1992; Pillai 1992). The levy varied by sector. For the manufacturing sector, it came to 420 ringgits per worker per year. To further encourage employers to reduce their dependence on foreign labour, the levy was more than doubled in 1996 and rose to 1200 ringgits in 1997.

In practice, however – and in contrast to the neighbouring country of Singapore, where the rule is effectively implemented and employers pay for the levy (Abella 2006) – most employers in Malaysia simply deduct the levy from the foreign employees’ wages. Contrary to the policy’s aim of discouraging the hiring of foreigners, the law does not forbid employers to deduct the levy from wages.10 Of all the factories where the migrant workers in this study were employed, only one paid for the levy – and this factory was unionized. In three other factories, the company paid half of the levy. All the other companies (14 of them) deducted the levy from wor-

---

10. For example, the Penang textile union, which had filed a case at the Labour Office against an employer who deducted the levy from workers’ wages, lost the case for this reason (personal communications with the secretary of this union).
kners’ wages. On average, migrants paid 100-130 ringgits per month in 1999 for the levy and additional costs for procuring the papers needed.\footnote{Deductions varied; companies also deducted other costs such as for the yearly compulsory medical check-up (approximately 180 ringgits) and the processing of an identity card, work permit and visa (approximately 130 ringgits).} Marium (factory II):

> Our contracts did not say anything about a levy. In the beginning they only took 500 for the levy; now it is 1200 per year. Sister, we only earn about 400 ringgits now, and each month 120 ringgits are taken. The Malaysian government is very smart, they make a lot of money out of us.

It was found that the levy deductions accounted for 25-30\% of the migrant workers’ regular monthly wages and equalled several months of basic wages. Other studies came to similar conclusions (Kassim 2001a:122-134; Wickramasekera 2002:24).\footnote{In the aftermath of the economic crisis, the levy went up to 1500 ringgits in 1998. Out of fear for social unrest particularly among Indonesian workers, it was reduced to 1200 ringgits in 1999. By reducing the levy, the home minister effectively acknowledged the fact that levies are deducted from workers’ wages.} Malaysian labour law stipulates that workers who earn less than 1500 ringgits a month are not to be taxed. The levy paid by foreign workers, a considerable source of income to the government, is an indirect way of taxing them, as confirmed by government officials (interviews courtesy of Garcés-Mascareñas 2006).

Following the economic crisis, the Malaysian government announced in August 1998 that ‘in order to keep more Malaysian money in Malaysia, foreign workers, except domestic workers, should also contribute to the social security system’ (SCM 1998). Since September 1998, foreign workers have had to contribute to a pension scheme, the Employees’ Provident Fund (EPF). Employees generally contribute 11\% of their wages and employers 12\%. In reaction to employers’ protests about this ruling, which they considered an additional financial burden, it was decided that for foreign workers, employers should contribute a fixed monthly rate of only 5 ringgits instead of 12\% of their wages. While migrants benefit less from the scheme than do Malaysian workers, the lower contribution of employers for foreign workers makes hiring foreign workers cheaper than hiring local workers.\footnote{Migrants who returned to Bangladesh in 1999 were often found to have not received their EPF contributions. Not all employers had transferred the deductions to the EPF. This created a lot of anxiety within the migrant community. By mid 2000, the issue seemed to have been resolved: foreign workers’ EPF money was paid in cash before departure. Their own actions, including demanding assistance from the Bangladeshi High Commission, had led to this breakthrough.}

In sum, although policies were officially geared towards guaranteeing equal treatment between Malaysian and foreign workers, in practice they protected the interests of employers more than the rights of migrant workers (cf. Todd, Lansbury & Davis 2004). In the aftermath of the economic crisis, this tendency has only increased. Due to the lack of law enforcement, foreign workers can easily be manipulated and paid less.
Since the work permit effectively binds a migrant to his or her employer and he or she loses the right to be in the country as soon as the employer cancels the permit, employers have a disproportionately large leverage over the worker. If for whatever reason the employer is not satisfied, he or she can cancel the permit or threaten to do so. The aim of Malaysian migration policies is to control migration flows and prevent permanent settlement. However, these laws effectively not only curtail migrants’ movements and possible attempts to settle, but also compromise their more general rights (cf. Anthias 2000). As Fernandez (2005) points out, although migrant workers enjoy the same benefits as Malaysian workers under the Employment Act, the Immigration Act, under which the work permit is issued, takes away that right. Migrants who want to file a case with the industrial court and are subsequently dismissed by their employers, do not receive a visa to remain in the country during the court case even though wrongful dismissal cases that are taken to court can take years to be settled (cf. Bhopal & Rowley 2002:1181). Without legal aid, this is virtually impossible – even if one has the stamina and perseverance to go through with it.

As seen from the above discussion, under the migrant labour regime, global dynamics intersect with local ones and can easily compromise the position of migrants. As argued by unionists and academics alike, hiring foreign workers is often cheaper for employers than hiring Malaysian workers, and this has a negative effect on Malaysian workers (Rudnick 1996; Lee & Sivananthiran 1996; Rasiah 2001; personal communications from unionists 1999).

Several questions thus arise: what do migrants do, if anything, to improve their situation? What are the relations like between local and migrant workers? Did the large-scale employment of migrant workers in Malaysian industry lead to the development of two different labour regimes – one for migrants and one for Malaysian workers?

### 7.3 Collective action

Some Bangladeshi migrants spoke to their managers about the unjust payments and their maltreatment. While in some cases this led to the desired result, in general questioning superiors about wages was met with a ‘take it or leave’ attitude. Repeated efforts resulted in threats of being sent back to Bangladesh. Nevertheless, a few collective attempts were made to obtain rightful payments. The Bangladeshi men in factory III were the only ones who initiated a strike. As seen earlier, their basic wage was lower than stated in their original contracts. Rashid:

When the management did not listen to us, we decided to do something. We had a leader and we organized a people’s meeting. We stopped working for three days. Then the managers were scared, and we talked. We said that if they would not give us what we deserved, we would go to the labour office. Finally we got it. But by then almost a year had passed. They said we would get the extra money for the first nine months too, but we never did. Our leader was sent home. More
people were sent home. The management said they sent them home because they
did not work well, but that is not the case. They sent them home because they
complained. Some of us are higher educated than others. We understand things
better and we try to help the others. (…) The management is scared that we may
form a union or organize, and so they sent them home.

Sending these leaders home was not only an act of retaliation but also served as an
example for others. A few women had tried to obtain fair wages by attempting to file
a complaint with the labour office. Ferdousi (factory I):

In the beginning there was a woman called Parveen in our factory. She was smar-
ter then we were. She was experienced as she had been in Malaysia before. She
knew that we could do something about our situation. We had a meeting, and she
explained everything. We would gather signatures from all of us and then we
would go to the labour office. We all wanted to join. Then the management heard
of it. They asked us who was involved. Some of us were young and inexperien-
ced; they said ‘we are’ and also told them about Parveen. The older women, who
had been in Malaysia a little longer, said nothing. That was smarter. (…) Parveen
was sent home. After that everybody was very scared. You see, it is very dange-
rous to complain, because if we complain we are sent home.

In all cases of organizing, it was mentioned that the initiators were educated; they
had finished high school or college. A similar action took place in another factory,
where an ‘educated Bangladeshi girl’ had initiated the action. Here, too, the underta-
king was eventually discovered and the leader was sent home. Although inexperien-
ce or lack of unity may have played a role in the failure of such actions, the dominant
reason they failed was the ease with which the company could not only dismiss the
leaders but also send them out of the country and thus prevent them from causing
any further trouble. It also instilled fear in migrants and prevented them from trying
to obtain their rightful payments. The magnitude of the fear was further exemplified
in that the women told these stories only after they had left the company.

According to some of the migrant women, they did not manage to obtain their
rightful payments because there was no unity among the migrants. Some wanted to
do something about it collectively and openly, while others were afraid that this
would be counterproductive and preferred other, more individual or acquiescing
tactics. Parveen (Factory II):

If we had the unity, we might have got our rights. But the girls did not do that.
There were some women who were devoted to the madams. The madams were
also fond of them. We were ‘anti-madam’. They thought that if they did anything
against the management they might be sent back home. Now they have left and
some of them have run away, but we are in difficulties.

The mistrust and the friction among the migrant women are discussed more extensi-
vely in Chapter 8.
There is generally no assistance from labour unions. This is for several reasons. First, the level of unionization is low. Officially, migrants can join unions, as long as they do not form unions of their own; however, many companies stipulate that their foreign workers cannot participate in union activities (Kassim 2001a:129). Second, the fear of retaliation from the management prevents migrants from accepting support. We had occasionally offered the assistance of a befriended unionist, but the offer was always declined. Even if a case could easily be won, workers felt that they might just as easily be put on a plane to Bangladesh. Third, the animosity between Malaysian and migrant workers—or perhaps more generally, the lack of solidarity between workers of different ethnicities—did not enhance the possibility for joint actions. Nevertheless, the Malaysian Trade Union Congress (MTUC) has rightly called for the equal treatment of foreign and local workers, as this would ultimately benefit all workers (MTUC 2005).

7.4 Divisions in the labour force

Malaysian workers primarily identify themselves as Malay, Indian or Chinese workers, rather than as more general ‘working class’ people. In many workplaces, this stratification has been reinforced by the division of labour on the basis of ethnicity as well as gender. Ethnicity, which generally receives little attention in literature on labour control, is often used in an opportunistic fashion on Malaysia’s shop floors. Companies often attempt to control the labour process via managing inter- and intra-ethnic identities and undermining intra-ethnic solidarity. Although overt conflicts are relatively rare, ethnicity is a silent and visible presence in labour relations in Malaysia’s industry, dividing the labour force. The continuous persistence of ethnic identification amongst Malaysian workers has weakened class unity and diminished the role of labour unions (Daud 1985; Ong 1987; Caspersz 1998:258; Ng 2004a; Rowley & Bhopal 2005:567; Kung & Wang 2006).

However, most studies that come to these conclusions, as well as other studies focusing on labour relations in Malaysian industry, primarily refer to the experiences of Malaysian workers. The fact is often ignored that for more than a decade, one third of the labour force in Malaysian industry was composed of migrants (see e.g. Caspersz 1998; Rasiah 2002; Elias 2005; Bhopal & Rowley 2005). Through the large-scale hiring of migrant workers, different sub-groups based on different iden-
tities/ethnicities have been added to the labour force, which evidently affects labour relations. Although it was beyond the scope of this study to interview Malaysian and Indonesian workers, some observations can be made.

The labour shortages that occurred in the early 1990s (before migrant workers had been recruited) enhanced the bargaining position of Malaysian workers’ versus employers, and both working conditions and wages improved (Rasiah 1993; Rudnick 1996; Kung & Wang 2006:592). As a result, the labour movement did not grow significantly. Although workers’ reactions to unfair labour conditions continue to be indicated by the absence of large-scale collective action, they are predominantly signified by spontaneous actions such as unofficial go-slows (i.e. working at a slower pace), non-availability for overtime, sudden walkouts and fits of ‘spirit possession’. However, another form of dissatisfaction was expressed on a massive scale: large numbers of workers resigned or took jobs elsewhere, which became the dominant way of showing discontent (Rudnick 1996; Smakman 2004; Todd, Lansbury & Davis 2004:10; Elias 2005: Kung & Wang 2006:588). As workers increasingly started to ‘job-hop’, high turnover rates became a major problem for many companies that relied on unskilled labour. It was during this time that the large-scale recruitment of migrant workers started, much to the dismay of Malaysian workers and labour unions who felt that it potentially compromised their bargaining power and had a dampening effect on their wages. Various academics have confirmed that the large-scale hiring of foreign working has seriously hampered wage rises in the industrial sector (Pillai 1995; Rasiah 2001; Tan & Ariff, 2001; Athukorala 2001b).

Kung & Wang (2006) conducted one of the few studies to compare managerial tactics concerning Malaysian and foreign workers in Malaysia’s industry. Focusing on Taiwan-based multinationals, he showed that labour control practices imposed on migrant workers differ from those imposed on Malaysian workers. As Kung & Wang argue, they vary according to the level of ‘subordination’ the workers feel versus the employer. The relative ease with which Malaysian workers could find employment elsewhere when dissatisfied had strengthened their position vis-à-vis their employers. Different tactics needed to be employed to keep them from leaving for jobs elsewhere. Managers said that Malaysian workers needed to be ‘pampered’ with company dinners and such like, whereas migrants could easily be coerced by scaring them. In the words of one manager interviewed by Kung & Wang

---

16. Ong (1987) first analysed spirit possession as a form of resistance. In her much cited study on factory women in Malaysia, she describes women’s occasional fits of mass hysteria whereby they claim to be possessed by spirits. She argues that this is a way to cope with the work pressure and the impersonal modern factory regime (see also Todd, Lansbury & Davis 2004, who argue the same).

17. It should be noted that whereas switching jobs can be lucrative for workers in the short term, and the mere prospective of being able to job-hop may increase their bargaining power, in the long term job-hoppers lose out on annual increments and ultimately higher wages.

18. One tried to attract new workers by offering special benefits and by stimulating workers to bring their friends or relatives by rewarding them with 100 ringgits if the new workers stayed for at least for a year (Rudnick 1996; Kung & Wang 2006:588).
If one needs to reproach a local worker, one has to do so in a mild tone, but to manage a Bangladeshi worker is much easier, one only needs to push, to press them. Bangladeshi workers in this study made similar observations. Abdul (ceramics company):

In Malaysia people can easily find factory jobs, there are so many vacancies. Locals jump from one job to another. Supervisors cannot yell at them because then they will leave. My supervisor disturbs me a lot, but I cannot say anything; I cannot leave.

Not surprisingly, the Taiwanese companies studied by Kung & Wang were highly satisfied with their Bangladeshi labour force. Likewise, Smakman (2004) – who conducted a large-scale study among garment companies in Malaysia – found that firms were most satisfied with their compliant and diligent Bangladeshi labour force. 19 The relative powerlessness and related compliance of migrants is as important an incentive to hire them as lower labour costs; these two aspects may reinforce one another (cf. Ryan 2002:105). This favouritism based on diligence and compliance often has a negative effect on Malaysian workers. For instance, Sharif (furniture company) noted that:

Sometimes, Malaysian Indian people want to do overtime as well. But they do not get it. They fight with the boss. They say: ‘Why do you only give OT to the Bangla people?’ But if the boss were to give them OT, he would have to pay them 1.5 times the rate; he only pays us 1.25.

It was also frequently noted that many Malaysian workers did not want to work much overtime, and resented Bangladeshi workers for working so hard and setting the pace. Many understood this reaction: ‘They live here all their lives and can have jobs; we are only here for a short time and need to earn what we can.’

The seemingly diverging interests between Malaysian and migrant workers are no exception, nor are the employer’s instrumentalization of these differences and the lack of solidarity among workers from different geographical or ethnic backgrounds. Under the current global production system, it is often considered in the interest of the employer to create divisions between workers on the basis of gender or race (cf. Kabeer 2000:32). Chhachhi (2004:155), who studied workers in New Delhi whose companies also hired migrant workers from the south Indian state of Kerala, came up with a similar finding: Malaysian workers were constantly made to feel less productive than the migrant workers. As seen here, companies utilized the differences between migrant and local workers as a new mechanism of control to change the composition of the labour force to one that was more compliant and productive. Simultaneously, Chhachhi (2004:176) stresses that local workers were

---

19. My study in the mid 1990s among textile and garment companies in Penang came to similar conclusions (Rudnick, 1996).
regarded as ‘insiders’, whereas migrant workers remained ‘outsiders’. Those who came from the same region/background as the managers felt that their position was more secure. Many Bangladeshi workers also noted that despite being liked for their hard work, the locals were often treated fairer by their supervisors. Many Bangladeshis envied them for their relatively greater negotiation power – as well as for the ease with which they could job-hop whenever they wanted. Combined, these aspects fuelled resentment among workers and divided the labour force.

Relations with migrant Indonesian workers employed in some of the factories the Bangladeshis were working at were generally friendly but not close. The reasons for not forming alliances were similar to the reasons Bangladeshis generally gave for not engaging in collective action more frequently. A few anecdotal comments can be made about possible differences between these migrant groups. Although it was generally felt that Indonesian women workers were treated similarly to Bangladeshis, their situation was sometimes thought to be easier. First, they were fluent in the language, as their native tongue is virtually the same. Second, several women felt that Indonesian women could and actually did switch jobs more easily than Bangladeshi workers when treated unfairly, despite the risk of becoming undocumented. They were considered to be braver, since they could blend into Malaysian society more easily, as they ‘looked and talked like Malays’. Third, some believed that personnel managers preferred Indonesian women to Bangladeshi workers due to ethnic affiliations, whereas other women denied this and said that particularly Chinese superiors would treat them similarly as long as they worked well.

The hiring of migrant workers has led to the further instrumentalization of ethnic and national divisions to control labour by drawing on the different positions and perceived diverging interests of Malaysian and migrant workers. Although Malaysian workers appear to be in a relatively better position than migrants (Kung & Wang 2006:592), and a dual labour regime seems to be at work, some caution is required. Labour and immigration policies affect all workers, albeit to different degrees, whether they be migrants or Malaysians. Looking at migrant versus Malaysian workers in a unilateral way would serve only to reiterate the divisions within the labour force. To understand the workings of ethnicity and the relations between workers in Malaysian factories, more research is needed that includes workers of all backgrounds, with sampling based also on the types of contracts on which they are hired. In the age of flexibilization, the tendency to hire more workers temporarily to cut labour costs can also be seen among Malaysian workers. Malaysian and migrant workers’ position may be more alike than assumed. The temporary workers’ situations are generally vulnerable, with lower remunerations as they often miss out on various benefits and wage raises (cf. Tucker 1993; Lee & Sivananthiran 1996; Nichols & Çam 2003; Fernandez 2005).

Irrespective of the virtual absence of collective action and failure to secure their rightful wages, the Bangladeshi workers – like their Malaysian colleagues – sought ways to cope with their work situation. These were mostly covert acts geared towards enlarging their space within the tight boundaries set by their supervisors. Some, however, resorted to more drastic acts and, despite the risks involved, chose to seek employment elsewhere.
7.5 Coping mechanisms

Many migrants had ailments that were caused by the pressure of work, long working days and work-related stress (worries over remunerations, uncertainties concerning contract renewals, etc.). Fatigue was a common problem. I often heard women say: ‘My body is tired all the time.’ Many suffered from insomnia, back pain, headaches and pain in their eyes from staring at minuscule electronics components all day long; many were worried about their health.²⁰ Studies on factory workers’ health in Malaysia are scarce (Heng & Rampal 2004).

Since it was not possible to interview managers or visit companies, little can be said about the managerial approaches or strategies that were applied by companies. The work pace was said to be fast, with a great emphasis on increasing production quotas and improving discipline.²¹ In line with the Fordist production mode and Taylorist assembly line production, surveillance was intense and the output was closely monitored (cf. Elias 2005:209).²² Several women stated that over the course of time, they had found ways to handle the ever-increasing work pressure. Khadiza (factory I):

At first we knew nothing, but now we can tackle different situations. Now we know how to manage our supervisor. My Malay supervisor, Azma, she is really a very bad woman. When I see her, I start my machine; after 10-20 minutes, when she leaves, I shut my machine down. My machine is very sophisticated. We have a ‘pin’ system. There is a tool where the pins are stacked. The supervisor will fix my quota according to the stacked pins. By shutting, it down I can reduce my quota.

During another conversation:

We have a new supervisor. She does not know the work all that well yet. I have been here for four years now; I know all the tasks. She is still learning, so I tell her what is important. Whenever I have a day that I am a bit tired, I tell her that an easy job needs to be done, so I can sit down. Of course, I know that some day she will be smart, but for now it works and she will not disapprove.

---

²⁰ One woman we met went back to Bangladesh because of eye problems and headaches. It has been found that most women working in semiconductor firms in Southeast Asia have to wear glasses after three years, others have to leave the company (Chhachhi 2004:165).

²¹ It was interesting to note that several women who had fled from a TNC to a small, local factory made a point of expressing how they missed the order, work environment and discipline of their former employer. These migrants’ reactions, however anecdotal, seem to support Edwards and colleagues’ (1998) ‘disciplined worker thesis’ that workers prefer an ordered and disciplined work environment to disorganization and chaos (cf. Glover & Noon 2003).

²² In factory I (Japanese owned), regular meetings were held focusing on targets, discipline and a strong company culture, methods typical of Japanese companies (cf. Ong 1987; Chhachhi 2004).
Rita (factory III):

Every time a new order comes in, the first days they will have to fix the pay rate per piece. In the beginning, a new task is difficult. They always want us to work faster. So then we all try not to work too fast so that the rate is not too low.

The ‘go-slower’ actions as described by Rita to lower quotas and/or improve piece-rates are common ways to try to manage the system in many factories around the world (cf. Mullings 1999; Elias 2005). Although companies may anticipate these actions when calculating production targets, these actions were felt to have some influence, however small. Women tried to counter the ever-increasing work pressure and extend the boundaries of the confinement that was imposed on them. It made the job more bearable and gave them a sense of being in charge. Meanwhile, they were always careful not to overstep the boundaries. The relationship with their supervisors was not to be hampered; their acts were always non-confrontational.

In earlier studies on female factory workers, the emphasis was generally on adverse working conditions and exploitation (cf. Elson & Pierson 1981; Ong 1987; Heyzer 1989). More recently, in line with the debates on agency, it has become more common to focus on the empowering effects of wage employment. Increasing attention has been paid to ‘covert acts of resistance’ (Dannecker 1998; Constable 1997, 1999; Mullings 1999; Harrington 2000). These studies are theoretically inspired by James Scott’s (1985) work on peasants’ ‘everyday forms of resistance’ in rural Malaysia. Scott argues that resistance needs to be defined broadly and should include individual and covert acts. Many poor people cannot afford to openly resist. Their non-confrontational approach is aimed at making life and work more bearable rather than at transforming the social structure. However, these acts may serve as inspiration and motivation for major collective acts in the future (Scott 1985).

Although a few studies on female factory workers depart from this theoretical point and show that workers’ hidden acts can have structural effects (cf. Mullings 1999), studies often emphasize the everyday acts of resistance and appear to overstate their actual effect on women’s experiences. At times, the titles of studies and statements made at the outset claim more change than the data actually evidence. For example, in her study on female garment workers in Fiji, Harrington (2000:3) highlights the workers’ negotiation of ‘the forces of capital, the state, patriarchy and the labour market’. The acts of resistance range from go-slow to smearing lipstick on the garments. The data concerning the workers’ realities point to the unlikelihood of negotiation and the adversity of the working and living conditions. As Aguilar (2000) argues, the structural context within which these acts occur and the relation to women’s perceptions on limitations for change are often downplayed. The pendulum seems to have swung from analyses that often focused exclusively on exploitation (i.e. structural limitations) to analyses that sometimes appear to overemphasize empowerment and agency.

Arguably, acts described as ‘resistance’ might sometimes be more appropriately understood as coping mechanisms – finding ways of creating a bit more space, more room to manoeuvre – while generally choosing to adapt to the situation one is in.
This certainly applies to the acts of Bangladeshi migrant women, such as the ones described above. These acts did not lead to structural change, nor did they offset the feeling of fear and worry that weighed heavily on most Bangladeshi migrants (‘Will I still have a job next year?’ ‘How can I save money with wages this low?’). However, the acts and behaviour described above were undoubtedly of significance; while enlarging their space, their sense of self was positively affected. Shazeda (electronics factory):

Once we were punished for talking while doing our job. They ordered us to clean the toilets. They thought that they were punishing us, but we actually liked it. We put one person on guard and then sat down in the toilet and chatted and laughed. It took us half a day to clean it, and we did not have to work.

Latifa (factory I):

Bad stories about Bangladeshi women were published in a Bangladeshi magazine. The supervisor came to me and asked me to translate the story for her. I knew she would then say bad things about us Bangladeshis. So I simply told her that I could not read. The others said the same.

Nahar (factory III):

We are not supposed to talk when we work, but we do sometimes. When they get angry and tell us to stop, we just tell them that we are discussing work; as they can’t understand a word of what we say, they let us.

Coping mechanisms did not necessarily involve trying to decrease the workload or increase payments per se. These stories were told with laughter. Besides having got their way, women got a kick out of avoiding being seen as ‘non-compliant’. They had outsmarted their superiors; those who sometimes labelled Bangladeshi migrants as ‘dumb’ and coming from a ‘backward’ country were tricked. Space was gained, both symbolically and physically, while hope was reignited (cf. Ong 1991:301). Although they did not change the situation structurally, these acts helped them to maintain a sense of self and dignity. In the words of Constable (1999:206), the women were ‘geared toward surviving the situation with their sense of humanity intact.’

Other migrants had resorted to a more drastic and overt way of coping with their working situation: they had absconded. Before looking into this aspect, it is instructive to take a closer look into the issue of contract renewals.

---

23. Our data on Bangladeshi men concerning this issue are too limited to allow informed assessments or comparisons.
7.6 Contract renewal

Contracts were provided for two years and could be renewed each year for a maximum of six years. When we met the women in 1999/2000, only one third of the original number of Bangladeshi women hired in 1995/6 were still working in the four main companies studied (factory I: 56%; factory II: 34%; factory III: 28%; factory IV: 19%). Although the reasons for the substantial difference between factory I and factory IV may be multiple and not easily identified in retrospect, some aspects seem to have played a determining role: factory IV—a garment factory that did not pay piece-rates but fixed wages—had not renewed the contracts of the women whose performance was not regarded as satisfactory. Moreover, the women had done reasonably well during the first few years because the human resources manager, who was of Bangladeshi descent, had ensured that there was enough overtime, and some may have not found it worthwhile to stay on when overtime decreased after he had left. In factory I, on the other hand, wages had been relatively low, quotas had not been fulfilled and many chose to stay on (if their contracts were renewed) so as to earn and realize their aspirations. The rest had either returned home or had left for employment elsewhere. Although the exact breakdown of departures is not available, migrant women’s estimates give an indication. On average, 40-50% of the Bangladeshi migrants who had arrived with them were said to have already returned home. The remaining 20-30% had looked for jobs elsewhere and had absconded. Of those who had returned to Bangladesh, it appears that less than half had had any say in the matter; most had been sent home or their contracts had not been renewed.

In her study among 200 returned Bangladeshi migrant women who had been working in the Middle East or Malaysia, Siddiqui (2000:53) also found that a significant percentage of women were sent home prematurely: 29% returned home within a year. Likewise, in a study among 114 returned Indonesian migrant women, Sukamdi (2001) found that 20% had returned from Saudi Arabia before their two-year contracts had been fulfilled. Most problems were employer related and were considered a dramatic development for those involved, as large debts had been incurred to make migration possible. We too found that many migrants try to avoid being sent home for similar reasons.

Four main reasons for women’s forced departure can be identified: being involved in activities related to improving wages (i.e. being regarded a recalcitrant worker); not being productive enough (i.e. being a ‘slow’ worker or medically unfit); engaging in relationships with men (i.e. having a boyfriend); and because the company had ‘too many’ workers or had found cheaper workers (i.e. new migrants). For example, as far as the last point is concerned, the contracts of the women in factory II were quite unexpectedly not renewed in 2001, even though they were legally entitled to stay another year in Malaysia. The contracts had not been renewed because Indonesian workers had been recruited. The women made a link between their termination and the hiring of the cheaper Indonesian workers (after five years, the Bangladeshi women’s wages had increased substantially due to annual increments). Although some of the women were sent home while they still held a con-
tract, as in the case of factory III, in most of the cases contracts had expired and were not renewed.

During the months we were conducting the survey, the women in factory I were awaiting news concerning the renewal of their contracts. Before contracts are extended, migrants undergo a compulsory medical exam. Anxiety was omnipresent. Only five weeks before their contracts expired, the appointments for the medical exams were made; 16 of the 45 women were not given an appointment, which implied that their contracts would not be renewed. Although some were ready to leave and were content with the decision, others were very upset. It was said that the supervisor did not like them and that there had been quarrels. It was alleged that some of the others would not get a renewal because they had ‘boyfriends’ (this is discussed further in the following section). A few women did not understand why they had not been given appointments, and it was concluded that there must have been a mix-up over names (the previous year, a woman had been mistaken for someone else and sent home). Several women took action: those who had a good relationship with their supervisor went to talk to her, while those who felt that the supervisor had misjudged them went directly to the human resources manager. Five women successfully stood up for themselves: they convinced the manager, got an appointment for the medical exam and passed it. Of all the women, only one failed the exam – which had been expected, as she had severe gastritis and had been off work for a while. In the end, seven women went home; another five had found employment elsewhere and ‘disappeared’.

7.7 Absconding

Although switching jobs was illegal and punishable with detention, an estimated 20% of the Bangladeshi women who had been employed by the four main factories had changed employers. It was generally believed that men switch jobs more frequently than women. Although we also felt this to be the case based on the stories told by both Bangladeshi men and Bangladeshi women, the data are too fragmented and the sample was too small to make any informed statements in this respect.

The migrants mainly absconded for one of two reasons: because they were about to be sent home or feared that they would be; or because they were unhappy with their earnings and expected to earn more elsewhere. Of the Bangladeshi migrants we talked with, 16 women and 13 men had changed jobs. The majority of the women we met had absconded because they feared they would be sent home. Only a few had left in order to earn higher wages. However, stories were told of other ‘brave’ women who had left for better wages elsewhere; most of these women had worked in factory I or factory II, where wages had been considered to be disappointing. The men had left for higher wages, because they had been maltreated or because their factories had been closed down.

A new employer was found via middlemen, usually Bangladeshi men with ‘connections’ to potential new employers. The middlemen also took care of the necessary papers. Since the original employer generally retains the passports of migrant
workers to prevent them from absconding (which under Malaysian law is an illegal act), new passports needed to be obtained. Corruption among both Malaysian and Bangladeshi authorities was necessary for their actions to succeed. On average, they paid 2200-4000 ringgits to obtain the necessary documents.

Absconding because of pending dismissal

We met several women who had absconded from factory III – the company that had dismissed large numbers of Bangladeshi women within the first months after their arrival. Nasreen and Fahima were among these women. Nasreen had wanted to abscond because she was not an experienced garment worker and suspected that she might be sent back. One of her girlfriends had an ‘uncle’ who worked and lived in the same area, and he offered to arrange everything. To make it lucrative for a potential employer, there had to be at least four of them. Fear was infectious, and Fahima was one of the women talked into joining them. Fahima:

I thought a lot about it. I came here with other peoples’ money. I should pay back their money. I came here also by arranging a loan from the Grameen Bank. You know, the bank will claim interest on it. My family will have to repay the loan. I was thinking about our monetary problem, and in the end I left the factory and came here. I did not know the Malay language. When I worked in the factory my supervisor sometimes offered me grapes and apples. I worked well. She was nice to me. But I was afraid of her because she had the power to send anybody back. I was very worried about it.

They had paid the uncle 1000 ringgits in all. Nasreen and Fahima ended up working in a sweatshop that dyed and printed material. The workplace was next to a swamp; it had a roof but no walls. The few Bangladeshi workers lived in corrugated-iron sheds next to the building. Fahima was responsible for dying the fabric. There were no protective measures – no clothes, gloves or masks to ensure that the workers would not be harmed by the dye they were exposed to. When I met her at the workplace, she felt weak. She had lost most of her hair and was nearly bald as a result of the dangerous chemicals she was exposed to daily. Although the wages were not bad, they were often not paid. Fahima:

My boss is very poor. We often work till midnight. Sometimes he says he will pay me in one or two weeks, but he can never keep his word. That is why I am very anxious. Yes, at the other factory I earned well. I was good at sewing. I made up to 880 ringgits a month. It is a good place. If I had stayed there I would have earned much more. If I had known the language already, I would have understood and I would not have left. I left because I was scared.

Fahima thus regretted her move. However, Nasreen – who, according to her own accounts, was a slow sewer – did not regret her move. She was convinced she
would have been sent home otherwise. Moreover, as she had been paid per piece, her income had been low.24

As for the other factories, some women absconded because they had bad relationships with their supervisors and frequent conflicts, and this was expected to culminate in their dismissal. Other women fled because they had been discredited for having a boyfriend or getting married. It was frequently noted that relationships were the most common reason for women to be sent back. Most factories were strictly against the mixing of sexes. Guards regularly passed by to check on the women, and bus drivers who brought them to work kept an eye on their behaviour. The companies appointed a woman in each house as ‘leader’: these women were the contact persons between management and the women, and were expected to keep an eye on the other women and to settle conflicts.

Although companies generally stressed their interest in guaranteeing the safety and well being of the women, a more pragmatic reason appeared to be that they did not want to be responsible for pregnant women. Companies impose mandatory pregnancy tests during the annual medical exam before contracts are renewed. Factory owners have played this paternalistic role ever since women first started to work in Malaysia’s industrial sector; surveillance passed down from male relatives to alien male authorities, exacerbating gender stereotypes. Control thus extends beyond the factory floor and encompasses the control of social spaces as well as the physical body (Ong 1991:291; Barber 2000:403). Although Bangladeshi men had girlfriends, fewer men were sent home for this reason. Apart from the fear of pregnancies, another reason for companies’ disapproval of women’s engagement with men appeared to be the belief that some men would encourage women to speak up concerning unfair treatment or assist them in finding employment elsewhere. Ironically, to avoid being sent home, some women who were engaged in relationships absconded with the help of their male relatives, boyfriends or husbands.

Absconding for higher wages

To some of those who did not fear being sent back, absconding had seemed a viable way out of what appeared to be a dead end. If they were to stay, earnings would remain low and dreams or needs would remained unfulfilled. By leaving, however – and only by leaving, it was felt – they had a chance to avoid their fate.

Shazeda worked in factory I. After her second year she had been transferred to a department where there was no overtime, reducing her wage to 280 ringgits – a sum that leaves little possibility for saving. With the help of a Bangladeshi agent (an uncle of a Bangladeshi ex-colleague), she and four other women left for another electronics company. They paid 1500 ringgits to the agent to cover his ‘costs’ and 1700 ringgits to the employer for the work permit and visa. Shazeda:

24. Whereas a few other women who had fled from factory III had found employment with good conditions and remunerations in another multinational garment company, the fate of most of the women was unknown.
The basic salary is higher here than in the other factory. Also the overtime rates are high here: We get 3 ringgits, before we only got 1 ringgit. It is so much better here; the house is nicer and cleaner because there are fewer people.

The costs incurred were equal to about six months of wages, including overtime. It would take her 12-18 months to pay off her debts. We met Marium when she and her friend Tasnema visited their ex-colleagues and friends who were still working at factory IV. Marium:

I left because there was no overtime. How could I earn? My boyfriend helped me. Now I work in a company that makes sofa pillows. I paid 500 ringgits to the owner. The basic wage is 500 ringgits there. Everything is better there. We have been married now for three years, and we live together. My husband is going back to Bangladesh next month, and I will leave in six months to join him.

Marium claimed that she paid only 500 ringgits to the employer, though her friends were quick to add that she had also paid 4500 ringgits in order to obtain a new passport. Marium did not regret the move and stated that she was able to earn a lot despite the huge investment. She had left at an early stage and had worked in the ‘new’ factory for four years. Her ex-colleagues agreed that she was better off than they were. They were in awe of these women; their action had given them prestige.

Both Shazeda and Marium were obviously happy with their new situation. To us it was not apparent whether they really had gained much financially. However, that was not all that counted: they felt that they had changed their situation for the better, as they were more comfortable where they had moved, both job-wise and socially. For several women, regardless of their reasons for absconding from their original companies, remaining in Malaysia was as important as the earnings were. For women or men to return home so soon was regarded as ‘shameful’. Some of them had left painful situations they did not want to return to, while others were, for the time being, happier in Malaysia. This issue is further discussed in Chapter 8.

Factory II, where wages were particularly low, originally employed about 100 Bangladeshi women, of whom about 25 had absconded. Hameeda, who remained in factory II, reported:

The women who left did so because they thought the wages were too low. They had connections – relatives or friends – who helped them. Some of us also have

25. By then, Tasnema was working at a restaurant in another town; she was the only Bangladeshi woman I met in Malaysia who was not working in the industrial sector. She spoke fluent Malay and wore baju kurung (Malaysian traditional clothes), which other women hardly did. Her features resembled those of ethnic Malays. Since she looked ‘Malay’ – as this confident woman said herself – it was easy for her to ‘blend in’.

26. A year after Moream had moved to the new factory and nine months after I had last seen her, I was informed that the contracts of the women in this factory had not been renewed and the workers had been sent home.
relatives, but we would not go. My uncle told me not to go because it is dangerous, and if we got caught it would also be bad for my family. Those who left thought it would be easy to get new papers. But it was not so easy. Some of them were locked up in a room by their new employers and forced to work. They did not get any money. If they are illegal, the employer can earn more money. Some women have been caught by the police and put in jail. But some women managed to buy new papers. It might have cost them 3000-5000 ringgits, but now they earn a lot of money. We are not so brave. We were scared by those stories. We do not earn much but we are safe here. But we have a big problem because we have no overtime.

Leaving the company entailed a risk. Some women chose not to chance it, even though they admired those who had left and succeeded. Moreover, since the costs were high, it would take a while to earn back this new investment. Abdul (electronics factory): ‘If one runs away, that is very expensive too. One needs to buy a new passport and all the other papers. It is not worth it: after deducting all these costs, there is nothing left.’

Some women said they remained in their current jobs because the men assisting with transfers may ‘expect something in return’. Obviously, not all absconsions were based on sexual favours. The ‘boyfriend issue’ was nonetheless a complex one. This issue is looked at in more detail in Chapter 8.

7.8 Differences between migrant women and men

Although the Bangladeshi men and the Bangladeshi women largely worked under similar conditions and for equal payments, there was a stark difference in the way they discussed their working lives, which also had methodological implications (as discussed in Chapter 4). Due to the precariousness of the situation, women were sometimes reserved and brief in speaking about unjust payments and adverse working conditions. Men, on the other hand, were very outspoken on the topic. They would usually start the conversation by elaborately explaining the conditions in their factories. In contrast to the women, who at times concealed their unfair treatment, men sometimes made their situation seem even more negative in order to make their point.

Although most of the women had limited experience in the public sphere or workplace, the data show that both women and men tried to obtain fair treatment by approaching management and, in some cases, by attempting to organize collective action. Yet women appeared more fearful of the managements’ threats to send workers home, and although women did abscond, absconision appears to have been more common among the men. Education and background certainly played a role.

27. Some men specifically asked us to write about these issues, including in Malaysian newspapers, so that people would know and something would be done.
Many of the women who had absconded or instigated actions had been well educated. This also applies to many of the men. As seen earlier, migrant men generally had a higher level of education and frequently came from wealthier households than the women.

However, other reasons – largely gendered ones – also played a role. As a result of Bangladeshi men’s socializing and collective experience, when an injustice occurs they are more likely to speak up than are women, whose collective experience is that speaking up for oneself generally evokes negative reactions and repercussions – an experience that was reinforced when their female friends were sent home.

While both men and women had a lot to lose if they were dismissed, many women had even more to lose. Due to prevalent gender norms, their migrations had often been controversial from the start. Relatively speaking, men seemed to be able to more easily challenge their dependence on their original employers and look for options elsewhere (cf. Chhachhi 2004:144). Women often felt that the risks involved in leaving their employers were greater for them than for the men. One important factor that restricted women from changing jobs was their sense of physical vulnerability. Although they were not always satisfied with their wages, many felt safe in their homes and workplaces. Furthermore, the women’s position and future possibilities are related more strongly to keeping their ‘honour’, not only in economic but also in physical and social ways (cf. Kabeer 1998:70). As far as differences between the position of Bangladeshi men and that of Bangladeshi women within the factories were concerned, these could not be assessed as we did not visit the factories. Sexual harassment on the work floor was not openly discussed; it was said not to occur. This might reflect one of two things: either a general reluctance to talk about such harassment (given the sensitivity of the situation, we chose not to probe further into this issue) or its rarity. It needs to be noted that both the supervisors and the colleagues of these women were generally female. Some women said that they had occasionally been slapped in the beginning, when they were new to the job and sometimes made mistakes.

There is another interesting point to be made regarding gender and work, this time related to employers’ impressions. The literature on global FTZs and industrial production – particularly those for the garment industry and electronics sectors – has frequently highlighted companies’ preference for female workers due to women’s alleged dexterity and docility. An image of the assumed natural submissiveness and nimble fingers of factory women was constructed and reiterated by states such as Malaysia in order to attract foreign capital (Daud 1985; Ong 1991; Caspersz 1998:273; Elias 2005:206). Feminist studies on FTZs generally focus on the gender aspects of women’s employment and the construction of such ‘female’ characteristics as meekness, diligence and dexterity – characteristics for which women are hired and that lead to their vulnerability in the workplace.

However, as Salzinger (2003) has pointed out, these characteristics do not straightforwardly and indiscriminately apply only to women. In my earlier study on the garment and textile industry in Penang, I found that while a few employers preferred female workers, most preferred Bangladeshi migrant men to local women simply because the men were more obedient and worked harder. Some job-hopped
but not nearly as much as the female Malaysian workers did (Rudnick 1996; Smakman 2004). While the male and female Malaysian workers were relatively free to go where they wanted, Bangladeshis were bound to their employers, which made them comparatively docile.

As the data presented in this chapter show, the relatively vulnerable positions of migrant workers – irrespective of their sex – make them act in comparatively compliant and diligent ways. These features, which are much desired by many employers who draw on unskilled labour, have little to do with sex or biological inclinations per se, but are largely influenced by the workers’ position and relative social and economic vulnerability within society at large and, more specifically, vis-à-vis employers.

### 7.9 Job satisfaction

Would Bangladeshi migrant workers have gone to Malaysia had they known their actual wages beforehand? This is of course a hypothetical question, one that cannot be answered with certainty. Many of the women and men working in factory II, the ceramics factory and other companies where wages were particularly low stated they certainly would not have migrated. Many others, predominantly those working in factories III and IV and other reasonably well-paying companies, said they probably would have migrated. Their income was low, yet they were still able to save money. Additionally, as it was often argued, they had wanted to go to Malaysia.

Yesmin (ceramics factory):

> The attraction of good wages had given me the courage to come here. The courage came from inside my heart. When I received such a low salary my heart was broken. Yet, beggars can’t be choosers.

Some migrants expressed their frustration about doing ‘dumb’ work. Men who held college degrees were particularly over-qualified for their jobs, and despite their capabilities they were often not promoted. Some of the women faced a similar problem. Khadiza:

> I can operate any type of machine in my department. I believe that if I had been Malaysian, I would have been promoted to be a technician. Since I am a Bangladeshi, they will not give me that chance. I will have to leave the country in two years. It isn’t worth it for them to give me training.

Apart from such frustrations and in contrast to men, women frequently emphasized the non-wage benefits gained from their employment. Having had no chance to obtain respectable paid employment in Bangladesh, they were aware of the skills and working experience they had gained. It filled many with pride. Here are some examples,
Fatima (factory IV):

I learned so many things. The knowledge I gained will be helpful when I go back. I have this plan: I want to set up a tailor shop. I have confidence that I can do it.

Yesmin (ceramics factory):

We can now teach others. If I were educated, I think I could even become a supervisor in a factory in Bangladesh. I now know that I can work and earn money. By working here, I got many ideas.

Hasina (factory IV):

By working side by side, I find I have gathered knowledge about human behaviour, and I have found the courage to work with other people. If I had had this experience earlier in my life, I would not have stayed with such a bad husband.

Farhana (factory I):

In the beginning, I often cried. I slowly picked up courage. My self-confidence has gone up so much. I realized I should use my brain more. I do have a future, I now know that.

Despite a general dissatisfaction with wages and working conditions, these quotes reflect an equally valid feeling of personal gain in skills, increased self-esteem and more self-confidence. In order to fully understand women’s situations and subsequent decisions, it is important to acknowledge this seeming paradox. Through their jobs and their daily negotiations, women came to explore new concepts of self, female status and human value (cf. Ong 1991:305; Wolf 1992; Pearson 1998; Gandhi & Shah 2002). Several women said: ‘I was stupid when I first arrived; now I am clever all around.’ It was repeatedly stressed, particularly by those working in electronics factories, that although the job skills may not be of direct use after their return, since such factories were non-existent in Bangladesh, they nevertheless felt they had personally gained much from the experience.

7.10 Conclusion

Many migrant workers do not earn what they have been promised. Labour contracts are often breached and labour laws are frequently not honoured. Although migrants are theoretically protected by Malaysian labour laws, in practice it is virtually impossible for them to file a complaint with the Labour Office. Since migrants’ visas are tied to their contracts with their employers, the latter hold a disproportionately large amount of leverage over the former. As soon as an employer dismisses a migrant worker, the latter loses his or her right to be in the country and therefore must
leave. The data show that the threat of dismissal is often used to stop migrants from protesting over unfair or unjust treatment. The migrant labour regime in Malaysia is predominantly based on coercion. The resultant relative obedience of migrant workers is what many employers desire.

During the economic crisis, migrant workers were badly affected. It was officially recognized that migrant labour served as a buffer against such sudden economic downturns: migrants can simply be laid off. However, those who kept their jobs were also affected, as both employers and the government (via increases in the levy) tried to cut costs by transferring them to the migrant workers. The intricate global embeddedness of migrant workers as exemplified by their vulnerability to worsening exchange rates, combined with their relatively vulnerable socio-economic position, made them particularly prone to the dramatic changes that occurred in the political economy due to the Asian economic crisis.

Further research that incorporates workers from all backgrounds – local and foreign – and the employers’ points of view is needed. Conspicuously few studies that focus on labour issues in Malaysian industry acknowledge the large proportion of foreign labour in that industry. Nevertheless, some observations can be made. Companies that draw on unskilled labour appear to employ different methods of managing migrant and local workers. Although it is acknowledged that local workers’ rights are often not honoured, local workers can and often do seek legal redress in cases of unfair treatment. Since labour unions in Malaysia are relatively weak, it appears that local workers’ most effective bargaining tool with respect to their employers is the fact that labour has become relatively scarce; if not treated well, they may change jobs. This right is not available to migrant workers.

As far as labour management is concerned in labour-intensive industries in Malaysia, it can be concluded that at least two different sets of factory regimes are at work. One pertains to local workers. Despite its many flaws, it tends to lean more towards what Burawoy (1985) calls a hegemonic labour regime, namely a situation in which workers are not entirely dependent on employers but are to some extent protected by the state and by legislation. The second regime applies to migrant workers and is largely based on coercion: laws do not seem to apply, and the state does not appear to be particularly keen to change this situation. Despite the clear lack of studies comparing the situation of local and foreign workers, the findings of this study seem to indicate that these two regimes are used to weaken the relative position of both groups: local workers have witnessed the dampening effect on their wages due to the arrival of foreign workers (employers seek foreign workers instead of increasing the wages of local workers and improving production systems), while foreign workers are made to understand that they will never enjoy the same benefits and treatment as local workers. Ultimately, all workers would benefit from less mutual animosity and more collective efforts to achieve uniform treatment and pay-

The migrant men and women were well aware of the power relations under which they worked. Options for changing their future for the better were construed in ways that best fit within their perceived context of structural constraints. The data reveal that unfair treatment and early dismissal influenced those Bangladeshi workers who
decided to find new employment. This finding seems to suggest an unexplored relation between unjust treatment and the relatively high incidence of ‘illegal’ workers. Although collective action was generally not an option, a relatively large percentage (an estimated 20%) changed employers despite the large risks. Some were found to abscond due to pending dismissal. Employers sometimes took on the role of the seemingly protective patriarch by dismissing migrant women who seemed to be seeing someone of the opposite sex. This patronizing act appeared to be less based on high morals and protection than on the nuisance of having to deal with pregnant employees.

The migrant workers occasionally resorted to non-structural, covert acts of non-obedience as a way to deal with the pressure of work, the monotony and their lack of power in the factory. While some authors found in their studies among women workers that these covert acts had structural effects in the long run, other authors appear to overstate the structural effects of these acts. In this study it was found that similar acts should be seen as everyday coping mechanisms rather than as acts of resistance. Although these acts usually had minimal structural effect, they were nonetheless significant as they evoked feelings of personal empowerment and of being in charge (albeit marginally so). Despite disappointments and hardships, many of the Bangladeshi women appreciated the personal gains in skills and human resources in general. In addition, our data suggest that the men, because of their gendered position, felt that they had gained less from their experience.

A further interesting finding is that employers’ desire for what in the literature on FTZs are often called ‘meek, nimble and diligent’ workers is less based on sex than is often assumed. These characteristics are generally prescribed as being inherent in females. By proclaiming the natural diligence and obedience of its local female workers, governments like the Malaysian state attracted foreign investment. Ironically, it appears that feminist scholars who focus on female workers and the consequences of their hiring due to the alleged natural characteristics of meekness and obedience, only reinforce the predominance of this image. However, employers in labour-intensive industries want obedient and diligent workers – full stop.

In the case of Malaysia, many employers appear to prefer migrant workers, including Bangladeshi men, to local women, simply because the latter have greater bargaining power than the former. This preference has little to do with sex or biological inclinations, but is largely influenced by workers’ relative social and economic vulnerability within society at large and, more specifically, vis-à-vis their employers.

The working experiences discussed in this chapter are not isolated from but intersect with migrants’ social embeddedness and experiences in Malaysia more generally. This issue is further discussed in the following chapter.
Migration generally entails important changes in a person’s life. A sociocultural reorientation of ‘doing and being’ takes place in the course of any person’s migration (Espín 1999:220; Vertovec 2003:17). In Bangladesh, most of the women we spoke to had lived with their families. While many of the women took a proactive role in the decision making regarding their migration, it was generally their male relatives who arranged matters in the public sphere. Being in Malaysia without their families, women’s social (gendered) space expanded. Their responsibilities and self-determination increased in ways that, for many, were rather – if not entirely – new.

Many women remarked that it had taken them quite some time, about a year, to acclimatize to their new environments and lives. In the beginning, everything had been new and unfamiliar; anxiety and tension had prevailed. The water had a ‘smell’ and the food tasted strange. Communication was a major problem: they did not speak the local Malay language and only a few knew any English. Their managers and supervisors tried to communicate via Bangladeshi workers who had arrived earlier; however, this did not allay all the apprehension or dispel all the confusion.

While some women said they had never really adjusted to their Malaysian lives, many made a distinction between ‘then’ – when they had first arrived – and ‘now’, after they had become accustomed to their new lives. While the ‘then’ was depicted as being hard and miserable, the ‘now’ exemplified their familiarity with and appreciation of certain facets of life in Malaysia. Malaysian lifestyles, gender norms and customs were different from those in Bangladesh. Although they had been ‘Malaysianized’, the Bangladeshi sociocultural context remained pivotal in their everyday lives.

Studies in the field of transnationalism have shown that migrants generally retain a dual frame of reference, that is, a dual orientation towards the ‘here’ – the host country – and the ‘there’, the country of origin. Aspects of life ‘here’ and ‘there’ are monitored and perceived as complementary aspects of a single space experience, impacting everyday life – a person’s activities, attitudes, perceptions and decisions (Gardner 1993; Guarnizo 1997; Espin 1999; Phizacklea 2003; Vertovec 2004:974-977). Sociocultural bifocality (i.e. a dual sociocultural outlook and orientation) is arguably even more severe for migrants who are on temporary contracts. They are continuously aware that they will be returning home after their contracts expire and thus plan towards that end.

In this chapter, I explore Bangladeshi migrant women’s orientational bifocality by examining how the ‘here’ and the ‘there’ interrelate and influence their daily lives, their decisions, and their actions and interactions, which also may impact their lives after their return to Bangladesh. Bifocality, as Vertovec argues (2004:977), is certainly hard to measure, but its workings are discernible in social practices and are conveyed in individual narratives.

---

1. Due to chlorine, which was new to most women and made many feel nauseous.
As several studies have pointed out, the impact of migration on the migrants’ lives in the host societies can differ profoundly between men and women, particularly pertaining to changes in gender roles and their concomitant sociocultural acceptability (Espín 1999:4; Morokvasic 2003). In Malaysia, migrant women tried to reconcile the two sociocultural contexts in which they were embedded in ways that were both meaningful to them and socioculturally acceptable. Living in Malaysia implied new lifestyles for the women, which could include interacting with male Bangladeshi neighbours in order to obtain assistance with such errands as taking care of postal and banking affairs. The recognition that women looked after themselves, had no guardians and possibly communicated with the opposite sex was at the core of the criticism of those who opposed women’s migration to Malaysia.

Negotiating gender norms and roles remained an ongoing process for most women throughout their stay in Malaysia. While being in bidesh brought welcome opportunities, it also brought inner conflict and fear of repercussions. As many of the relevant topics in this chapter are socioculturally charged or sensitive, many women were not comfortable speaking openly about them. The women were often careful in how they represented themselves.

8.1 Malaysia and Bangladesh: differences in gender roles

Malaysia, like Bangladesh, is largely a Muslim society. Although both societies are essentially Islamic, their gender norms and roles are not the same. Two of the main differences pertain to women’s participation in public space and women’s position in marriage and partnerships.

Generally speaking, Malaysian women take part in public life more actively than do Bangladeshi women. While Bangladeshi women have started to work outside their homes only recently, Malaysian women have historically been engaged in other, non-domestic work, such as working in the fields (e.g. harvesting) and selling their produce in the market (Ng 1999:35). Like the Bangladeshi women, the first generation of Malay women to work in factories during the 1970s and 1980s were also stigmatized for having low morals and taking on Western lifestyles (Arrifin 1984:253; Daud 1985; Ong 1987; Buang 1993). Nowadays, however, factory work for women is largely socially acceptable. While concerns about the moral conduct of Malaysian youth remain an issue of public concern, factory women are no longer

---

2. See Chapter 4 for a full discussion of sensitivity and representation.
3. While many studies focused on Malaysian factory women were carried out in the 1980s, over the last 15 years they have received scant academic attention. Based on the issues’ coverage in Malaysian newspapers in the early and late 1990s, plus personal communications with Malaysian factory women, NGO representatives and labour unionists, I am under the impression that factory women are no longer singled out as being ‘loose’ and ‘immoral’. A decade after the first women started to work in factories, the phenomenon appears to have become ‘normalized’. More research on this topic would be interesting.
singled out. In Bangladesh, men generally take care of the grocery shopping, and most women, especially those outside Dhaka, are not accustomed to venturing outside the home on their own. In Malaysia, on the other hand, women are active participants in the public realm.

The second significant difference between gender norms in Bangladesh and in Malaysia relates to the institution of marriage and to the social acceptability of women’s pre-marriage interaction with the opposite sex. As in Bangladesh, purity and honour are important concepts in Malaysia. Overall, however, there are fewer social restrictions on interactions between men and women. Dowries do not exist in Malaysia. On the contrary, men are obliged to pay a hataran (bride price) to their brides’ parents. Moreover, due to women’s higher level of education and increased participation in the labour market over the past decades, women have generally gained a pivotal say in choosing their grooms (Ong 1987:137; Manderson & Liamputtong 2002). Nowadays, dating and having boyfriends is quite common in Malaysia; this is in sharp contrast with Bangladesh, where having boyfriends and dating are not publicly accepted.

In short, gender norms differ between these countries in important ways. Thus, one cannot make generalizations about ‘gender and Islam’ or ‘women and Islam’. The sociocultural history of a location and its people, including pre-Islamic traditions and customs, influence the way the Islamic scriptures are interpreted and integrated into people’s daily lives.

It was beyond the scope of this study to interview Malaysian factory women and make a detailed analysis of the differences in the gendered position of women in Bangladesh and Malaysia. It can, however, be asserted that Malaysian women, aside from generally having a higher standard of living (Chapter 3), often have more room to manoeuvre and to pursue their own decisions than do their peers in Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi women’s perceptions of the differences between Malaysian women’s lives and gender roles and their lives and gender roles are far more pivotal in the context of this study than the actual differences in gendered positions between the women of these two countries. Whether or not objectively ‘true’, these perceptions influence Bangladeshi women’s actions, attitudes and evaluations of their own lives. By observing the lives of women in the host country, migrant women are introduced to alternative meanings of womanhood (Espín 1999:5). This may imply ‘processes of perceptual transformation’ (Vertovec 2004:977), that is, the exposure ultimately impacts the way people reassess their own lives while adapting to their new environment.

4. Nevertheless, young people, and particularly young women, continue to face the contradictions of traditional and culturally well-established norms and values versus the ‘freedoms’ that ‘contemporary industrial modernity’ offers. Resurgent Islamic factions criticize Malaysia’s Western-style modernity, which is seen as threatening the national social fabric and its traditional morals and Islamic values (Manderson & Liamputtong 2002:7; Stivens 2002).
8.2 The new social environment

Two topics were often mentioned when women commented on what they appreciate about Malaysia, namely the political and economic climate of the country, and Malaysian women’s self-determination, particularly regarding the right to work and its social acceptability.

Many of the Bangladeshi women had clear ideas on Malaysia’s economic and political situation as compared to that of Bangladesh. Malaysia was perceived to be orderly, clean and efficient. The absence of hartals (public strikes) in Malaysia was applauded; it was felt that people do not ‘fight over politics’. Related to this context, women would frequently refer to the ongoing rivalries between the two leading parties in Bangladesh, whose fighting made ‘the common people’, such as themselves, lose out. Several women blamed ‘bad politics’ for the unfortunate economic situation, the scarcity of factories and the lack of a modern electronics sector in Bangladesh, and hence for ‘little development’, as they called it. Another point repeatedly raised in this context was a certain kind of egalitarianism. Malaysians did not appear very class biased: Malaysians who were doing ‘low-rank’ jobs were not particularly looked down upon. ‘Here, supervisors and workers all sit talking at the same table during lunch’, it was noted. Comments on Malaysia’s economic progress were frequently linked to their observation that in Malaysia many women held jobs: ‘That’s why this country is developed.’ The large-scale employment of Malaysian women and the related social acceptability – a particularly topical issue in their own lives – were commented on approvingly. By holding jobs and earning a salary, Malaysian women were seen to share the responsibility of maintaining the family with their husbands or other family members. This difference, it was noted, helped not only the families but also the country to prosper. Shazeda (married):

By seeing the people in this country, I saw that if the husband and wife work together, their families will be happy, at peace and economically solvent. In our family, there is no peace and happiness. They do not cooperate and hence they do not know each other’s information [i.e. are not close]; they are not equal. Until we work, there is no development. We women want jobs.

As seen in Chapter 5, the lack of jobs as well as the limitations imposed by hegemonic norms on women’s roles and behaviour in Bangladesh had contributed significantly to many Bangladeshi women’s desire to migrate. They coveted the comparatively large social space and opportunities that Malaysian women were seen to have. Their comments on the way things were organized in Malaysia were always tied to reflections on practices in Bangladesh. Tasnema:

Here, the women take up all kind of jobs – they also sell soft drinks and snacks in the market. In my country, I could not operate a shop at the market. In our country young women do not go to the market at all. If I wanted to have a stall at a market, people would harass me. Men would perhaps even throw stones at me.
Azma, unmarried:

If there were more factories in Bangladesh where women are allowed to work, women would be able to hold up their heads in front of men. For example, in some areas in Bangladesh, men marry two or even three women and they misbehave with them. If women today were self-sufficient and they stood on their own feet, they could show their power in front of men. In Malaysia, men and women have equal rights; that is not the case in Bangladesh.

By earning a salary, women were perceived to be less dependent on men and to have more alternatives if a marriage ended due to death or divorce. Azma implies that if more women were able to earn an income, it would be more difficult for men to marry several women.

Self-sufficiency and self-determination are key aspects that were often raised when reflecting on what appealed to them in Malaysia. Moreover, Malaysian men and women ‘minded their own business’. A woman’s every step was not followed and criticized. Some women also said that Malaysian women are allowed to choose the men they want to be with and that they have the right to break off relationships.

Approving of gender norms – particularly those regarding women’s employment and a larger say regarding their marriage – does not imply that the Bangladeshi women liked everything about Malaysia. Some women stressed the downside of the perceived individuality. They disliked the fact that in Malaysia everybody had to take care of him- or herself and even worked at an old age, instead of having ‘happy domestic lives’. It was also mentioned that married children do not take care of their parents, as they live separately rather than with the extended family, which guarantees that they provide for their elders as well. They stressed that they liked to work and wanted to have that opportunity in Bangladesh, yet they wanted to work only for a limited period of time. There was more general criticism particularly concerning the hostility and condescension they often encountered from Malaysians. Many had suffered from frequent denigrating remarks about Bangladesh’s alleged backwardness. Moreover, Bangladeshis were frequently robbed of their money and gold jewellery, which induced fear in many of the women.

Over the years, most women had become comfortable with the lifestyle in Malaysia and confident about taking care of themselves. Some women did not necessarily regard the increased self-dependence as positive or ‘empowering’. Doing errands was not a choice but a necessity, as one woman pointed out. Yet, most women also remarked their greater feeling of self-reliance. Although many were burdened by the sorrows of meagre earnings and having to send money home, taking care of themselves had given them more experience and self-confidence. Most of the women – except those in factory 2 and the sweatshop that was described in the previous chapter – looked healthy and well fed. As one woman said: ‘At home, the best food is always for my husband and son. I miss them during meals. But here it is I who eat well.’

After work, the women usually did their household chores, such as cooking and doing laundry, or took a bath and relaxed. A popular pastime was watching Hindi
movies on TV or video. Women’s outdoor activities mostly took place in the neighbourhood: taking a stroll to the shop down the street or making a call from a nearby phone booth to relatives or friends elsewhere in Malaysia. Women might visit other female factory workers at neighbouring houses, and sometimes talk to Bangladeshi male relatives or friends at the gates of their houses — but never inside, since men are not allowed into the houses of women, a rule that everyone complied with. Many were on friendly terms with Indonesian or local neighbours, with whom they occasionally chatted and conferred, or whose toddlers were spoiled by the cookies and hugs provided by everyone. However, the women were usually among other Bangladeshis, and their social orientation, or interaction, was primarily geared towards their own community.

Since the working days were long and many also worked overtime at the weekends, the amount of free time was limited. Once or twice a month, the women would leave in small groups to do their shopping in town. Bangladeshi men were more visible in the public realm: they bicycled to visit friends in other neighbourhoods and met up at local restaurants for coffee.

Naturally, many missed their family members and loved ones at home. Being away was particularly hard for those who were mothers. They often cried when talking to us about their children, most of whom were living within the extended family or with their parents. It was often mentioned that they tried to keep themselves busy in order to avoid feeling homesick. Their interactions with the home country were sporadic and mainly took place via letters. Some women who could not write would ask for help from friends. Others sent messages recorded on cassette tapes. Phone calls to relatives in Bangladesh were made only in cases of emergency or great emotional urgency; overseas phone calls were too expensive. Few went home for a visit during the years they lived in Malaysia. As Phizacklea (2003:80) points out, transnational connections differ markedly among migrants: the transnational connections of unskilled labour migrants are hardly comparable with those of migrants who are employed as skilled employees or are international students, for example. Men and women alike kept themselves informed of the political and economic situation in Bangladesh through someone who had been home or acquaintances who had access to Bangladeshi newspapers. The grapevine also proved to be rather effective in exchanging rumours between and spreading them within the two countries.

Bangladeshi culture thus remained pivotal in the migrants’ daily lives and social orientation. Practices of the ‘here’ were continuously reconciled with their past experiences and actions ‘there’. Within the Bangladeshi context, women’s adherence

---

5. Almost every house had a TV and VCR. In some cases they were provided by the company; in other cases they had been bought by one of the women and would be taken home upon her return to Bangladesh (these were desired and prestigious consumer goods to be taken home). We often watched movies with women; it was said that they distracted them from their worries.

6. A Bangladeshi woman who listened to the weekly BBC World broadcast from Bangladesh, was teasingly called ‘the journalist’; she kept her colleagues well informed. Women often asked my Bangladeshi research assistant, Hasina, who had recently arrived from Bangladesh, about the situation in Bangladesh.
to purdah is at the core of the gender discourse (Kabeer 2000:34). Women in this study never questioned purdah; on the contrary, its importance was often emphasized. As seen in Chapter 6, their interpretation of purdah – like that of other working women in Bangladesh – differed somewhat from the conventional interpretation. Many regarded purdah to essentially be ‘of the mind’; that is, purdah resembles a state of mind. Whether a woman lived in purdah depends on her heart and her mind, in other words, on her intentions. Virtuous intentions would guide her actions, behaviour and demeanour, which would then be equally virtuous and modest; hence, she would observe purdah. Additionally, some women emphasized their faith, their ‘piousness’, and the fact that Allah watched over them and witnessed their ‘pure hearts and clean minds’: Allah was their ‘true’ witness, no matter what people thought or said. Essentially, these women placed strong emphasis on their own responsibility: living up to purdah depended on their own actions, rather than on control by guardians and the community, which is the hegemonic interpretation of purdah in Bangladesh.

Being dressed and covered properly was seen as an integral part of purdah, as it exemplifies a woman’s decency, her ‘pure’ mind and sincere intentions. Ideally, a woman wears a sari and covers her head with its ends. According to some women, one should also wear a burka (a long, loose garment covering the whole body from head to feet) when outside the house. For practical reasons, in Malaysia, shalwar kameez (a long dress, loose trousers and a scarf covering the chest and head) was regarded as the most suitable and appropriate attire.7 By highlighting modesty and ‘goodness’ through proper clothing, once more the emphasis was on women’s inner virtues, which effectively legitimized their actions or mobility. Shazeda, a pious woman, reported the following:

We can work outside and still keep our purdah. We can cover our bodies with a burka and move around. A woman who does not have a burka can cover her body with a piece of cloth. The meaning is the same. It is written in the Koran that with one piece of cloth you cover your body. After covering our body we can open our face. If any man sees this and makes a comment, it is not our sin. This is written in the hadith [tradition].

Women’s renegotiation of the meaning of purdah effectively entailed a renegotiation of the boundaries of permissible behaviour in order to expand their sphere of agency and decision making (Kabeer 2000:34).

Gendered norms of social behaviour are often largely internalized. They are part of habitus – the unquestioned, routine practices and habits that derive from a person’s upbringing and interaction with others (Jenkins 1992:74; Vertovec 2003:9). By stepping outside the sociocultural context in which they were raised and obser-

7. In Bangladesh, shalwar kameez (which originates from north-west India) is generally worn only by adolescent unmarried women and factory women. Apart from being practical for factory work, wearing shalwar kameez is sometimes also associated with being modern or trendy (Amin 1997:35).
vied alternative ways of ‘being and doing’ in the host country, the internalized gendered notions of which they are not consciously aware are likely to be brought to their conscious awareness (Agarwal 1994; Kabeer 1999:441). As observed in the discussion above, by witnessing alternative gendered practices in Malaysia, many Bangladeshi women re-evaluated gendered customs in their native context. For some, the alternative views were entirely new; for others, they affirmed or provided a vocabulary for sentiments they had long felt. While not all aspects of gender roles and behaviour as practised in Malaysia were approved of, they provided food for thought and led to renegotiations of the women’s gendered ideas and practices.

Nevertheless, while quite a number of the women were very outspoken, confident and unequivocal concerning their renegotiated views on gender norms and roles, for others, especially the younger women, this process was an ambiguous one that went hand in hand with bouts of doubt and inner conflict (cf. Brouwer 1998; Espín 1999:26). Women would occasionally make seemingly contradictory remarks, sometimes criticizing the way they lived in Malaysia (e.g. leaving the home and going to the market), and sometimes elaborating enthusiastically about what they had gained and achieved socially whilst abroad. While these inconsistencies sometimes appeared to be due to a woman’s attempt to represent herself in socioculturally correct ways, then forgetting about it and dropping her role at another point, contradictory remarks were also made for other reasons. Although much of their new lives ‘felt right’, they were often criticized by the Bangladeshi community, which adhered to the hegemonic (Bangladeshi) gender discourse, as is shown in the following sections. The younger women felt the most vulnerable to stigmatization, as they would need to marry after returning home. The general critique of their lives, in combination with personal internalized notions of appropriate behaviour, confused women at times and led to inner conflict and questioning. Farhana:

We are giving Bengalis a bad name in this country. We wear the dress of this country. Do you think I have no fault? I am also guilty. I am in love, seeing other women wearing this dress [shirt and trousers]. I go shopping and I do this and that. Actually when I think about it, I realize this is not correct. But again I think, who will do my shopping? So I go out. I wear what Malaysian women wear; I feel it is all right. But I should not do it.

Fear of social repercussions intermingled with doubt that the critics were ‘right’ after all. Likewise, while many of the women felt that their behaviour was not at odds with God’s word, many were not always entirely sure. It felt right, but was it?

When explaining that purdah is about the mind and not about seclusion per se, Helena (a divorced woman) remarked matter-of-factly that taking the teachings literally, as is conventionally done, is practically impossible. Basically, God could not have meant it that way. Yet, at another point she said: ‘I have the fear of death. Freeness in life is all right here, but not according to the Hadith [the written Islamic tradition]. It has consequences for the life hereafter.’

It is worth noting that what women are and are not permitted to do according to the Koran and the Hadith can be and is variously interpreted by Islamic scholars?
Making sense of reality was not always straightforward (cf. Brouwer 1998). The moulding and fusing of the innate convictions and practices of the ‘there’ and the newly acquired customs and beliefs of the ‘here’ often remained an ongoing and conflicting process.

In many migrant communities worldwide, it is often more difficult for women than for men to negotiate ‘acceptable’ behaviour. Women’s needs or desires to adapt to the host culture are often interpreted as being disrespectful to the home culture’s values. When women reconcile their traditional gender roles of the country of origin with the demands of participation in the new environment, culturally based conflicts may develop (Anthias 1992; Brouwer 1998; Espín 1999:23). This was the case in the Bangladeshi community in Malaysia. Many Bangladeshi men disapproved of both the women’s renegotiated definition of purdah and the lives they led in Malaysia.

8.3 Defamation

The Bangladeshi community in Malaysia was overwhelmingly composed of men. Many of them felt that their countrywomen’s migration to Malaysia was a violation of appropriate gender norms. Bangladeshi women’s unguarded lives in Malaysia were frequently criticized. As described in Chapter 4, the commencement of our fieldwork in Malaysia in the summer of 1999 coincided with a wave of defamatory stories in Bangladeshi tabloid magazines about Bangladeshi women in Malaysia. The general message was that they lived ‘immoral lives’. The stories often seemed to be excessively exaggerated or even made up, yet nevertheless could destroy the accused women’s lives. Some of the men who wrote these stories, mostly migrants working in Malaysian factories, had made unsuccessful advances towards the women they wrote about. Writing a defamatory story was a way of publicly taking revenge for being rejected.8 However, spreading defamatory stories often seemed to serve a more general goal as well. The stories tried to prove that only ‘immoral’ women migrate, and hence indicated a desire to reverse this new trend and restore conventional gender norms for women. Dannecker (2005:662) argues that the bad reputation of Bangladeshi migrant women is the result of successful transnational networking of migrant men, Islamic organizations and some intellectuals. Representatives of these organizations regularly visit male migrant workers in Malaysia and the Middle East. The aim is to strengthen Islamic identity; preserving conventional gender relations is emphasized as a pivotal tool for the maintenance of cultural authenticity.

Gossip and slander often intertwine with moralizing discourses. These are common modes across societies of evaluating people and actions, and are potential-

8. A parallel can be discerned with incidences in Bangladesh whereby turned-down suitors throw acid on the young women they desired. Both practices are aimed at severely scarring the woman and making her ‘unattractive’ to future suitors.
ly important tools of social control (Terbutt 1995; Brouwer 1998; van Vleet 2003:500; Bennett 2005; Elmhirst 2007:234). The defamation of women is historically remarkably common worldwide when women first move into the public domain to take up jobs outside their homes (cf. Massey 1994). As seen in Chapter 3, female factory workers in Bangladesh are often the focal point of similar slander (Amin 1997; Dannecker 1998:199). Likewise, the first generation Malaysian factory women were frequently criticized in the media as ‘kaki enjoy’ (pleasure seekers) who freely mixed with men. These strong reactions appear to emanate from fear and anger. Many men fear that uprooting the gender order and altering the balance of power will undermine their position. Some attempt to counter it by defaming the women in question by portraying them as sexually promiscuous (Daud 1985:114; Ong 1987:179).

In many societies, sexuality is an indicator of women’s moral identity, a source of control held over women. Sexuality is thus intimately linked with power (Foucault 1990; Chang & McAllister Groves 2000:75). Women’s sexual behaviour often marks the boundaries between their inclusion or exclusion from communities or societies (Anthias 1992:26; Terbutt 1995). When, for example, in the 1930s single Irish women migrated en masse to Great Britain, their new lives were frequently criticized as being driven by the search for ‘sinful pleasures’. Their alleged promiscuity was perceived to be the result of the absence of social control. The women were perceived as outcasts (Ryan 2002:55).

Migrant communities throughout the world frequently carry concepts of familial or national honour and dignity that are strongly tied to the woman’s sexual purity (Anthias 1992; Espin 1999:5; Brouwer 1998). Based on her research among various migrant communities in the USA, Espin (1999:7) relates that in the process of adapting to the host society, a stern focus on the preservation of tradition is almost exclusively observed through the gender roles of women. Women’s bodies become the site of struggles concerning disorienting cultural difference. Self-appointed ‘guardians of morality and tradition’, not unlike the Bangladeshi story writers mentioned above, are deeply concerned with women’s roles and sexual behaviour and the preservation of traditional values. Likewise, charges of behaving defiantly and being un-Islamic are instrumentalized through powerful sanctions against what is perceived to be a violation of social norms and values (Amin 1997; Dannecker 1998:199). Studies have shown that for many men, migration implies – at least initially – a loss of status and a threat to their gender identity. Many men therefore attempt to reinforce their own values and norms as way of reassuring their identity in an environment that is strange to them (Itzigsohn & Giorguli-Saucedo 2005:897).

Similarly, Bangladeshi men in Malaysia often spoke negatively about the presence of Bangladeshi women in Malaysia. The majority of men we talked to felt that women should not migrate without their guardians: it was not appropriate; women should stay at home. Many men’s comments revealed that they felt they lacked control over women’s behaviour. For example, Abdul (unmarried) said: ‘Whatever she [a Bangladeshi woman in Malaysia] wants to do, she can do. I cannot comment. I cannot stop her. I cannot interfere or say anything about it.’
In Bangladesh, guardians control women’s lives; they take responsibility for their behaviour and whereabouts. Moreover, if someone sees a woman ‘misbehave’, he can turn to her guardian and he will take care of it (cf. Brouwer 1998). In Malaysia there was no-one to turn to. This imbalance in the traditional gender order was met with frustration and dismay. Men’s general role as guardians was grossly violated; many took on a role of ‘collective guardian’, airing their disapproval.

Some Bangladeshi men recalled their embarrassment when they first saw Bangladeshi women arrive in Malaysia. They had told the Malaysians that in their country Muslim women would be at home, taking care of the family and living ‘good’ lives. They were frequently humiliated by condescending and racist remarks that some Malaysians made regarding the assumed ‘backwardness’ of Bangladesh. The perceived superior status of Bangladeshi women compared to that of Malaysian women (because the former did not work) had given the Bangladeshi men a sense of pride that soon diminished once Bangladeshi women entered the factories in Malaysia. The purity of Bangladeshi women versus the notion of the promiscuity of local women had served to maintain ethnic pride and make them feel morally superior (cf. Espín 1999:29).

Many men reckoned that ‘most’ Bangladeshi women behaved indecently in Malaysia. Although most men said they had not spoken to these women in person, they had ‘heard the stories’ (cf. Dannecker 2005:659). Reasons why they ‘could not talk’ to the women were partly based on gendered notions of appropriate behaviour, and partly on notions of class difference. Men often said that the Bangladeshi women in Malaysia generally came from ‘lower-class’ families; they could not talk to them as the women were illiterate and had ‘no culture’. As stated in Chapter 5, most of the Bangladeshi men we met came from families that were economically better off than the women’s families. Most of the men were also better educated. Class differences, however, were not always as large as perceived. Most women were literate and although their families endured economic adversity, they were not the poorest of the poor. The perceived class difference was partly related to the prevailing notion that only low-class – that is, very poor and ‘uncultured’ – women would leave Bangladesh to work in bidesh. In the absence of unprejudiced communication, many prejudices lingered.

There were, however, men who had talked to their neighbouring countrywomen in Malaysia and held different views. Mohammed (unmarried):

It is said that Bangladeshi women are earning money by going to hotels secretly. This kind of talking is prevalent all over the world. That is the only explanation I

---

9. Although many Bangladeshi men claimed they had not talked to Bangladeshi women in person, this was likely not the case for all of them. Some were neighbours and we knew that they had communicated or had made advances. Apparently, for many a man it was a matter of prestige to present himself as not having talked to women.

10. Likewise, two Bangladeshi university lecturers teaching at Malaysian universities informed me that Bangladeshi women who came to work in Malaysia were from the lowest classes and often had rather dubious backgrounds.
can give. I don’t know what is true or not. I personally do not see anything bad in the girls’ lifestyle here. I see them working here in Malaysian factories and sending money home. (...) The girls are not actually bad, very few are. The women are victims of male aggression, of the atmosphere in our society.

Zahid:

Apa, frankly speaking, before some women came to live on this street, I also thought the girls were bad girls. But when these women came and I helped them out when they needed to go to the bank or when there was an emergency, I talked to them a lot and then I understood their honesty. They told me about the problems their families have. That changed my mind. I do not believe any more that they are all bad. Apa [sister], our neighbour women work for 12 hours a day; we see it! They help their families and I respect them for that. Most men do not understand. You know, many men try to go out with the women.

When the first of the Bangladeshi women arrived, their neighbouring Bangladeshi men had offered them assistance. They helped them with groceries, showed them how to bargain and helped with errands, such as sending money home. Despite the growing criticism, some acquaintances had been made. Nevertheless, the rumours spread by tabloid magazines and other means reached the villages in which the Bangladeshi migrant women lived. Several women received letters from their families questioning the environment in Malaysia. Some of their relatives demanded that they return home at once: their living in Malaysia was bringing shame on the family. Shazeda, a married woman, had received an accusing letter from her brother:

My brother wrote me: ‘Apa, because you are in Malaysia our status is lowered.’ He told me so many bad things because of the magazine stories. The way he is talking means that I cannot go back now. Apa, I cannot tell him I came with my money and not your money, who are you to tell me these things. Because if I lose my izzat [honour], it is my parents’ izzat that I have lost.

A few women gave in to the demands to return. Many of those who stayed feared that their izzat had already been tarnished and believed that their chances of marrying a ‘good’ man had been reduced.

The effect of gossip and slander is greatest in tight-knit social systems in which the costs of exclusion are high and there exist few alternatives for social belonging (Merry 1984:296, in de Vries 1990:14). Drawing on the work of Foucault, Ong (1987:180) highlights the crucial role of hegemonic language, that is, the dominant discourse, which constitutes what is considered to be the ‘truth’. ‘The truth’ – namely what is perceived to be ‘reality’ – determines how people’s everyday lives are interpreted and can have a strong bearing on people’s lives. The discourse that ‘Malaysian Bangladeshi women are immoral’ was a powerful ‘truth’ when it was disseminated by men, who are traditionally the keepers of women’s purity in the Bangladeshi context.
However, as is so often the case with slander that is spread via the media, over time the supply of stories printed in magazines dried up. When asked during following encounters a year later, some replied that ‘people talk all the time’ and that they could not be too preoccupied with it as they had to live their own lives. Nevertheless, in women’s individual endeavours to reconcile Bangladeshi norms with their Malaysian lives, the possible repercussions or implications of potential criticisms were always considered. The women strived to be seen as respectable and ‘good’ in the eyes of the outer world and to ensure that no rumours regarding them would reach their home town or village (cf. Amin 1997:33; Rozario 1998:263).

8.4 Women about women

In rare cases, friendships had developed among the women who were living together; they cared for each other in small circles of like-minded friends, they cooked and shopped together, and they shared much about each other’s lives. However, the atmosphere in most hostels was not as harmonious and there were frequent clashes. The overcrowded environment that many women lived in stirred conflict and gossip. The one-family houses that served as women’s hostels frequently accommodated ten to twelve women. Some terraced houses, which were a little bigger, accommodated as many as 35 women. Women shared small bedrooms and slept in bunk beds. Bathroom and kitchen facilities were insufficient. Such conditions easily lead to irritation and quarrels. Moreover, some factories worked in shifts. Women had different sleeping patterns and often complained about noise and the impossibility of sleeping while others were cleaning, cooking or listening to music.

However, the troubled relations between many of the women were due not only to overcrowded living conditions. During our visits to women’s homes, we saw that many women simply did not get along well. Many of the women said that they did not trust the other women. The women were cautious in disclosing private thoughts or private matters. It was said that during quarrels, secrets were disclosed and things could become nasty. Some of the women from Dhaka – the ‘big city’ – said that the women from the villages had ‘crude’ and ‘rough’ manners. Also differences in education were sometimes mentioned. The few houses where we found the atmosphere to be harmonious and the women generally supportive of each other, also had women from various geographical, educational and economic backgrounds living together. While other factors may have been at play, the difference from the other homes was that the number of women sharing the house was lower (only 4–9 women) or had a leader (a spokesperson appointed by the company, who was often but not always older and frequently spoke English) who was well respected by the other women. The women were often highly suspicious of one another’s behaviour.

Women would often make a clear distinction between two kinds of ‘freedom’ found in Malaysia. They approved of the first kind, that is, the freedom to go about their daily affairs as described earlier, which included the occasional interaction with someone of the opposite sex (provided the women’s behaviour was virtuous and modest). Some friendships and marriages had developed between women and men.
However, they strongly disapproved of the second kind of freedom, namely ‘immoral behaviour’ and engaging with men in an ‘indecent’ fashion, that is, having sexual relations outside marriage. If someone engaged in the latter it would affect all the women, hence the women watched closely each other’s behaviour.

Although the women stated that many of the stories published about Bangladeshi women were not true or had been wildly exaggerated, they often aired strong criticism of other women’s behaviour in general. We were frequently told that ‘many women’ were ‘bad’; that is, they engaged in immoral affairs with men and were unconcerned about giving all women a bad name. A large number of women we talked to claimed that ‘the majority’ of their peers acted immorally. Although the criticism and gossip did not always take the form of direct sexual accusations, such accusations were often insinuated. A woman’s clothing was something that could evoke criticism. Most women wore Bangladeshi clothes when they left their houses after factory hours. A few women, however, wore shirts and trousers, and sometimes a headscarf, when they went out, just like the young Malay women; their clothes completely covered their bodies. They explained that it was much easier to get around when dressed in this way; one blended in and did not receive comments from people on the street. Other Bangladeshi women often spoke critically about it; they regarded it as indecent and said that these women had forgotten their ‘culture’.

Dannecker (2005:665), who interviewed some returned migrant women in Bangladesh, encountered the same phenomenon. It was not only men who criticized women’s behaviour; many women did the same. The profound criticism aired about each other was at times confusing. If taken literally, these statements would imply that every woman was simultaneously ‘decent’ – as portrayed by herself – and ‘indecent’, as sometimes hinted at by others. The remarks made concerning women’s alleged ‘indecent performance’ partly reflected genuine discontent with the behaviour of some women, something over which one had no control. However, after more observation and by getting to know the women better, it became obvious that many of the disapproving remarks they made about one another were often exaggerated and reflected other sentiments or served other purposes. First, these statements echoed the women’s anxiety, frustration and anger about being judged or stigmatized and about how other women’s behaviour might be regarded and affect their own honour. Second, these remarks were intended to emphasize their personal adherence to social norms. In other words, the remarks partly reflected the way women wanted to present themselves, namely as women who lived morally just lives, in line with prevalent gender norms, as such distinguishing themselves from the ‘other women’, who were viewed as immoral. Like the female factory women in Dhaka (Siddiqui 1991; Rozario 1998:264), Bangladeshi women in Malaysia policed each other. The fear of repercussions and the perceived mutual dependence in terms of ‘image’ resulted in women closely guarding each other’s behaviour and commenting on it critically.

Although the women largely agreed upon the definition of purdah, what was regarded as ‘decent’ in terms of dress code, going out and being ‘modest’ was often questioned and unclear. It was believed that those who adhered to purdah had the dominant gender ideology on their side. Most women did not seem to regard counte-
ring the dominant perceptions on women’s behaviour, gender and sexuality as a viable option. Instead, they went along with the predominant discourse. Few women commented on men’s behaviour or their role in alleged ‘indecent affairs’.

Ong (1987:188) observed a similar lack of solidarity among the first generation of Malay factory workers. She notes that those who were eager to be seen as traditional and conforming blamed the social interaction of their ‘unrestrained’ sisters for tarnishing the collective image of Malay factory workers. Malicious criticism was a common practice. This self-regulation stemmed as much from private resentment and conviction as from imposed conformity (see also Daud 1985:113).

Moreover, since exhibiting highly appropriate feminine behaviour may enhance a woman’s social and symbolic capital (van Vleet 2003:505; Bennett 2005:106),11 depicting other Bangladeshi women in Malaysia as ‘immoral’ confirmed a woman’s own adherence to prevalent gender norms. In other words, by focusing on the substantiation of the ‘bad girl’ image, a woman emphasizes that she does not belong to that group and confirms or establishes her own image of being a decent woman. Presenting oneself this way is hence partly strategic. Rozario (1998) encountered a similar situation when studying female factory women in Dhaka. The women she interviewed commonly compared their own ‘goodness’ with the qualities of the other women around them. As Rozario (1998:264) argues, by relaying the bad behaviour of one or several other women in her vicinity she suggests that she herself is ‘good’. The study by Chang and McAllister Groves (2000) among female domestic workers from the Philippines in Hong Kong came up with similar findings: the migrant women who were often depicted as sexually loose – that is, as prostitutes – were found to watch each other’s every move.

The women’s attempts to resist the label of ‘prostitute’ thus exacts a power struggle for the moral high ground, with gossip as a means of portraying oneself as a chaste and devoted member by foisting the label onto others. ‘Everyone wants to be higher than the other,’ one woman explained. ‘Even if they have to trample one another, (…)’ (Chang & McAllister Groves 2000:83)

Paradoxically, the tendency to judge other women by the hegemonic standards a woman is personally judged by, enforces a woman’s lack of liberation from repressive standards (cf. Ong 1987:191).

Effectively, the women reproduced the moral pressure that was placed upon them. The moral system was transplanted from Bangladesh to Malaysia by men and women alike, and the renegotiated meaning of purdah ‘of the mind’ and essentially of a woman’s own responsibility was not generally granted to others.

Sometimes, there was yet another explanation for the harsh words that the Bangladeshi women uttered about their countrywomen. Although they seemed to con-

11. Van Vleet (2003) comes to this conclusion after studying an Andean community in Bolivia, and Bennett (2005) after studying single women in eastern Indonesia; this underlines the fact that the findings presented here are not necessarily Bangladeshi, Asian or Islamic.
demn them, their callous words at times emanated from the desire to prevent their fellow women from being harmed. Parveen, for example, was an elderly widow who often used very harsh words when talking about the behaviour of other women. When I visited her after her return to Bangladesh, I came to understand that in fact she cared deeply for the other women. She had talked to them harshly, trying to protect the young women from their own ‘naivety’. She felt that the women would suffer the consequences of rumours and stigmatization, and wanted to prevent them from falling for men by scaring them. Her reprimands were rooted in her conviction that doing things the conventional way would make them happier; that is, parents should choose husbands for their daughters. Too much liberty would make them fall prey to men with bad intentions. Gossip can be an important mechanism for controlling women’s behaviour, reinforcing the pressure of self-regulation (Rozario 1998:264), as discussed in this chapter. However, Parveen, like other women who had taken on a leader role, found to her dismay that while many women generally paid her respect, they would not listen to her or heed her advice.

8.5 Courtship

While not necessarily uncontested, dating and courtship have become common among young urban people, including factory workers, in Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries (Daud 1985; Ong 1987; Manderson & Liamputtong 2002; Stivens 2002; Bennett 2005; Rydstrøm 2006). Courtship can be defined as the period between single status and married life in which young adolescents meet and may choose to have a more durable relationship with each other and marry. Courtship also alludes to the ways young people circumvent and renegotiate parental and societal norms (Manderson & Liamputtong 2002:7).

In the course of time, as Daud (1985) and Ong (1987) explain, it has become more common for Malaysian factory workers to have boyfriends. Apart from romantic feelings, they want someone to confide in and to help them solve problems, be they personal, financial or work-related problems. Moreover, women want to choose their own grooms (Daud 1985:123). During interviews, a Malaysian unionist and an employee of a local NGO also referred to the dating practices among Malaysian factory workers. They had found that, at least during the early days when wages were lower, having a boyfriend also meant having someone to take them out for meals. In this way, young women saved more money to send home or spend differently (personal communication with unionists and NGOs). Recent studies on Malaysian factory women including their dating practices have not come to my attention; more research is needed. Dating and boyfriends – which are salient topics in the lives of factory women all over the world – receive surprisingly little attention in the vast literature on women in FTZs.

Soon after their arrival in Malaysia, Bangladeshi men started dating Malaysian women. It was unanimously admitted by men and women alike that the majority
had girlfriends. The Bangladeshis were very popular among Malay and, later, Indonesian migrant women. The Bangladeshis were said to be ‘handsome’ and ‘polite’ (personal communications with Malaysian female workers and Bangladeshi men). Local men, however, were not pleased with this development, which ultimately resulted in tension and even large-scale riots between local and Bangladeshi men.

The men, for whom the concept of courtship was fairly new, adopted the courting practices that are customary among Malaysian factory workers. They found that they were expected to take their girlfriends out for meals and buy them gifts, and so they did. Gifts ranged from toiletries and clothes, to gold necklaces and mobile phones. When the men who were working in a factory where there was no overtime were asked whether they had girlfriends, they said that they could no longer afford one. Having a girlfriend did not come cheap: many men spent a substantial amount of money on their girlfriends.

A topic closely related to the dating issue is sexuality, something that has received little research attention in Asia or elsewhere (Kulick & Willson 1995; Manderson & Liamputtong 2002:3). As activists working on migrant workers’ issues and AIDS/HIV have pointed out throughout the years, migrant workers – like every adult human being – have sexual needs and are likely to be sexually active (Tenaganita 2005). Bangladeshi men confirmed that they occasionally had sexual intercourse, either with their local girlfriends or with a paid prostitute. I was in no position to openly discuss women’s sexuality. Due to the sensitive situation, any question from my part on women’s sexuality would have been regarded with great suspicion and have instilled fear that I would spread defamatory stories – a situation I did not choose to co-create.

While it is likely that some of the women had affairs, they chose not to discuss the issue with us. It was frequently said that those who had affairs were not the unmarried women, but the women who were married or had been married before. It was also said that women would not have become immoral had wages been fair and just. The material needs of families at home had led some women to engage in affairs with men who gave them gifts such as gold necklaces and bought them food. While plausible, these were second-hand stories, which in the circumstances I could not verify.

Over the years, I got to know some of the women who had been pointed out to me as being particularly ‘immoral’ and ‘bad’. It was easy to understand why within the Bangladeshi socio-economic context they had acquired the reputation they had. I knew their situation well and it was obvious that such labels utterly misrepresented these women, their decisions and their situation. Ferdousi’s story is a case in point (see also section 5.5: Married women, for her motivation for migration). She was described by her female ex-colleagues and her male neighbours as a ‘very bad

---

12. The comments by Bangladeshi men quoted on the issue of dating in Dannecker’s (2005:660) study are therefore slightly amusing: while the men ‘have been able to withstand the temptations abroad, women are too weak to resist’.
woman’. She had been married when she came to Malaysia. Her husband had not approved of her migration, but she had left anyway with her parents’ assistance. Her husband did not have a job and did not support her and her children. He had followed her to Malaysia using the illicit route via Thailand and found employment in Kuala Lumpur. He came to visit her to urge her to go home and ‘be a good wife’. She refused, and when she also refused to go with him to a hotel to spend some private moments together, he beat her badly. He called the management of her factory to make sure they would send her home. Arguing that she was needed there, he terminated her contract. Ferdousi then fled to another town in Malaysia.

Ferdousi had married when she was only 11. Her husband had physically abused her throughout their marriage. With the help of a friend, she obtained official papers from Bangladesh and divorced her husband. She found new employment elsewhere and married a man of her own choice. This man was younger than her, and this was part of the critique her actions had evoked. Her new husband was an intelligent and gentle man who appeared to respect her and stayed with her in the years to follow – also after their return to Bangladesh, as we later found. In Malaysia, Ferdousi seldom went out and when she did she always wore a veil. She did this not only to prove her honourableness to others, but also to be at ease with herself: to feel that she was an honourable woman who had made decisions that were in the best interest of her children and herself. She also was a pious woman. Concerning the rumours about her, she said:

I feel good. I have no stress any more, I can sleep at night and my back no longer hurts. If I did not have a husband, who would look after me if problems occur? You are a university graduate; you can take care of yourself. We cannot so easily. If we don’t have a husband, men can easily abuse us; it is not safe.

In short, while Ferdousi was often depicted as being an immoral woman, she in fact was someone who had freed herself of an abusive husband who had tried to rule her life. She carved out a life of her own choosing, one that was both free of abuse and emotionally more satisfying.

We witnessed that several unmarried Bangladeshi women and men had started to court in Malaysia. In Bangladesh, courtship is not very common. Parents and other relatives generally arrange their children’s marriages. It is generally not socially acceptable for an unmarried person to meet someone of the opposite sex. Nevertheless, it is common knowledge in villages and elsewhere that men and women regularly fall in love with each other; they meet secretly to share brief and treasured moments in places such as near the pond or in the fields.13 Although extra-marital love is a taboo and officially non-existent, many traditional songs and tales tell of love outside marriage that was strong but not meant to last (Guhatakurta 2002; personal communications). In Malaysia, some men and women befriend each other as a

13. University campuses, where students are less secretive about it, are perhaps a more open example.
result of the former helping the latter out with errands and sharing their daily experiences. Nazma: ‘When a woman has problems, feels hati susa [Malay for being sad; literally ‘difficult heart’], or when she is upset, she can talk with her boyfriend. A lot of talking helps; after that she feels better.’

Some friendships became more romantic. It was not uncommon to see a man and a woman talking to each other in front of the woman’s home or taking a stroll through the neighbourhood, quietly talking to each other. As men and women worked long days and did not always live in the same area, they did not see each other often – on average only twice a month. During our last field period in Malaysia, we noted that mobile phones had become popular and seemed to have revolutionized couples’ courting through frequent phone calls.¹⁴

Shared experiences of factory employment and living in bidesh had led to emotional and mental bonding, which had culminated in the desire to be together and marry. Many unmarried or divorced young women had migrated with the aim of ultimately improving their say and chances in marriage. The stigmatization episode, which was expected to have a negative impact on the women’s desirability as prospective brides upon their return to Bangladesh, had decreased many women’s chance of a favourable marriage. Marrying a man they had befriended and liked in Malaysia seemed only natural.

I found that unmarried women were very cautious about engaging in anything that might jeopardize their honour, let alone lead to the loss of their virginity. They feared social stigma; many women could not be entirely sure about the intentions of their suitors. Were they honourable – and would they really marry them as promised? Also, many young women simply seemed frightened and not ready for sexual intercourse: they were unfamiliar with the act, which was not uncommonly pushed for by men. Hameeda’s remark summarizes many young women’s sentiment. Hameeda: ‘We girls do like to talk to the boys, it is true. But the boys very much like to sleep with the girls; the girls actually do not want that.’

For young Bangladeshi women the significance of courtship is intrinsically related to the goal of procuring a marriage partner (cf. Bennett 2005:103). Getting married is generally less important to men than to women, because other powerful social roles are open to them. Moreover, men are not socially penalized for engaging in sexual relations the way women are (Manderson & Liamputtong 2002:8). Many young women are confronted with the problem of remaining chaste while keeping their male suitors hooked in order to marry them (Jennaway 2002).¹⁵ Several interesting studies of reproductive health and HIV/AIDS among young people, including factory women, found that young men and women who have sexual relations often have very different motives for engaging in them. Young women are often motivated by the fear of losing a boyfriend or potential marriage partner, and hence give in to the subtle pressure from the partner to have sex and believe their promises of a permanent relationship. As a female factory worker in Thailand stated: ‘Young

¹⁴. Only a few women had mobile phones, but others often received calls on their friends’ mobiles.
women think that if they have sex with their boyfriends, they will keep them forever – and that is a big mistake’ (Soonthorndhada 1994; Kwon Tai-Hwan et al. 1994; Ehrenfeld 1999). Bangladeshi men regularly have different intentions than claimed and were found to often put pressure on their Bangladeshi girlfriends to sleep with them. Women urged each other not to give in. A few had succumbed to the pressure, believing the sweet talk about soon-to-be, or hastily arranged marriages. When they were abandoned, these women were commonly referred to by others as ‘bad’, that is, as immoral. As is the case in many societies, it is the women who are penalized and held accountable for any sexual deviance (Ryan 2002:61; Rydstrøm 2006). Serious dating that would end in marriage was thus an issue for many young women. A closer look at the issue is taken below.

8.6 Potential grooms and marriages

A ‘good’ man was defined as a potential husband whose intentions are genuine, who is gentle and hard working, and whose family is respectable. Although women often seemed to disagree, there was surprising unanimity about certain known men being ‘good’; these were boyfriends of some of their peers. A good man did not pressure a woman into a physical relationship before marriage. He treated her well. Moreover, a good man was expected to not demand a dowry. When I asked a woman whether her partner demanded a dowry, the question was sometimes regarded as offensive (‘This is about love, not about money!’). Many commented on love-based versus money-based relationships. The latter not only included dowry demands but also excessive gifts received by the women. When relationships were serious, both the women and the men said that there were no large transactions from one to another, except perhaps in cases of emergency. We witnessed that in relationships that appeared to be balanced, happy and accepted by the parents, no major financial transactions had taken place thus far.

The Bangladeshi men knew that they would not get very far if they did not show their genuine commitment. Not surprisingly, couples would often discuss marriage very soon after they had first met. While dating was taken on as a ‘Malaysian’ custom, it was moulded to a Bangladeshi reference framework. Unlike Malaysian women, Bangladeshi women were in no position to ‘break up’ with suitors who turned out to be less desirable matches or to eventually meet someone else without being socially discredited for being ‘immoral’, even if they had kept their virginity. The purpose of courtship – namely exploring the possibility of a long-term relationship – was thus somewhat defeated.

While a few couples were openly engaged, others were more secretive about their liaisons. Most women were careful and proceeded slowly. Both men and women frequently activated networks of relatives and friends to find out about the other person’s background. It seemed that the men’s connections were sometimes more diverse than the women’s; they often had more relatives or connections through Bangladeshi men in Malaysia who helped them out. A man would try to find out whether the woman was honourable, that is, whether her izzat was intact. Women
would do the same thing concerning their male suitors. Via friends, friends’ connec-
tions and sometimes relatives who worked elsewhere in Malaysia, they would try to 
trace the background of the men, and to find out whether they were who they said 
they were and were indeed unmarried. One way of finding out about the potential 
husband’s family situation is to read the letters his sister writes to him. As one 
woman explained: ‘Because I know that when my sister writes to me, she will also 
talk about the family’s problems.’

When a couple have decided that they want to marry, the potential groom may 
take a trip to Bangladesh to discuss the matter with both his own parents and those 
of his potential bride. At other times, couples arrange their marriage in Malaysia, 
with or without relatives or fictive relatives in Malaysia acting as guardians and 
mediators. Marriage documents are sent from Bangladesh and a ceremony is con-
ducted. Although a dowry is generally not demanded, a kabir (brides wealth) is 
agreed upon. Kabir is a kind of insurance for the benefit of the bride: it is a sum of 
money a groom commits to pay if he divorces the woman. Malaysian law does not 
allow migrant workers to marry in Malaysia; hence, the marriages are semi-legally 
arranged but are nonetheless legal when the official Bangladeshi marriage docu-
ments sent by relatives are signed.

The main worry of many prospective couples concerned gaining the consent of 
their parents and relatives in Bangladesh. Couples often strive to return to Bangla-
desh together, as it is feared that if one returns earlier, parents and other relatives 
might pressure them into marrying someone else – and sometimes, as we saw, this 
does indeed happen.

Of the 36 young women (24 unmarried, 12 divorced) whom we got to know better 
and who were relatively open about the topic, 29 were seeing someone. We talked to 
25 of these women more elaborately at various points in time; their experiences are 
included in the analyses below. Nine others (5 unmarried and 4 divorced) were 
‘going steady’, but chose not to discuss the matter.

Three different groups and scenarios of newly married or engaged couples were 
discerned: those women who got married or engaged and were having stable and 
happy relationships; those who were at different stages in their relationship but were 
anxious about how things were evolving; and those who had been abandoned by 
their suitors and may well have lost a considerable amount of money in the process.

Happily engaged/married

Eight of the originally unmarried women had married in Malaysia; their families had 
accepted their marriage and their relationships appeared to be stable. Several other 
unmarried women had become engaged with the consent of their parents and would 
officially marry on their return home. These women were confident and content. 
Fatima had met her husband via her friend, whose brother was in Malaysia too and 
had once brought a friend when he visited:

He wanted to know my name, educational qualification and other things. Then he 
invited us to his house for his birthday. In this way, we met each other again.
Through my girlfriend he asked for my friendship. I accepted his proposal, but my girlfriend disagreed. Then we contacted each other through letters; our relationship developed and we finally got married. (...) The maternal uncle of my husband arranged our marriage ceremony very secretly, without inviting our friends and colleagues. According to the terms of overseas employment in Malaysia, no foreign employee can get married here. We managed to get our kabin nama [marriage document] from Bangladesh with a den mohr [bride price] of 20,000 takas. The maternal uncle of my husband fixed the amount. All members of my family as well as the family of my husband know that we are married.

Fatima had a stable relationship and was very happy. She had been working in the garments industry in Bangladesh.

The men these women had married, or wanted to marry, respected and loved their wives or wives-to-be. I met some of the men frequently, and witnessed the agony they suffered and the hurdles they had to overcome in their families to obtain their parents’ consent to marry the women of their choice. Much time could pass before solutions were found or strategic moves could be made. Meanwhile, the men stood by their girlfriends and reassured them that things would turn out well. Morshed was a case in point: the woman he loved – a smart young woman called Afroza – came from a family of less economic standing than his. Moreover, Afroza had fallen ill due to stress. She required medical care, for which Morshed paid. He respected her needs and honour and was praised for this by all the women who knew them.

Most women did not live with their husbands, as hostels were often compulsory and renting a private place was expensive. Hence, as mentioned above, couples saw each other only at weekends or even every other weekend. Spouses had their own bank accounts and were saving for their common future, while some women said they still sent money to their parents.

Unsure

For other women, the process had gone less smoothly. Four of the unmarried women, one woman who had married in Malaysia and three of the divorced women were unsure and anxious about the future of their relationships. Marium was a young woman who had left to work in Malaysia because her family had faced sudden financial distress. As her peers recalled, her family repeatedly wrote her to request that she send money. She had married a man in Malaysia. Marium:

I am still scared even though we are married, because his family is more hi-fi [higher class]. They are all highly educated. Five of his brothers are; they have good jobs, some abroad. We are nothing compared to them. If my husband does not recognize me as his wife after returning to Bangladesh, what will I do? This is my only fear.
I asked whether her family had known that they were getting married. Marium said that they had known but that nobody had said anything to her about it. When I asked whether her husband’s family had known, she replied:

I do not know. This is my only fear. He did not tell me whether he informed his family or not. He says: ‘I am a man. When my family tells me I should get married, I will tell them I am married.’ He always says to me that he will keep me well and will accept me till death. He says such things. Even so, I have fear. But what else can I do but believe him? I am happy because I could get married. Though if it does not last, then how can I be happy? But I am happy at present. (..) One day, he saw me. Then he gathered information about me, and he called me on the phone. I told him I could not believe him. He kept calling for me and I talked to him. At last, after seven months, he married me to make me believe him. The deed of marriage, kabin [bride price], was 50,000 takas. He arranged it all; I did not do anything. I did not have anything to say then. Then I was not aware of myself as such. I could not understand many things at that time. I would not have married if I had had the understanding I have nowadays. There were no relatives to take advice from. Friends here get married as they wish, because marriage stops the rumours. Then people do not say bad thing if one talks to a boy. So they get married. We got married after we’d known each other for seven months. (…) All of them [men] say that they will marry. In the end, though, the affairs do not last long. There are so many lies.

Her husband had visited Bangladesh after they had married; he was supposed to stay for two weeks but ended up staying for five months. Marium feared what was rumoured, namely that his family had meanwhile married him to someone else. Marium was tormented and upset; she cried during our conversation. Her example exemplifies the power imbalance in relationships: the fear of being socially branded and the desire to marry and be regarded as honourable had led some women to agree to marry their suitors a little hastily.

While others were perhaps more careful, they did not necessarily feel less anxiety. Tasnema’s suitor, Ahmed, had returned permanently to Bangladesh because of health problems. They still intended to marry after Tasnema’s return from Malaysia. Ahmed’s mother had seen her picture and regarded her complexion as ‘too black’, yet had not openly disapproved of the marriage. Tasnema aired her doubts about being able to earn enough during her remaining time in Malaysia for a dowry, which apparently was expected in this case. She was anxious about her looks, her age and her potential husband’s health. What this lively young woman wanted more than anything else, was to be respectfully married.

Abandoned

Finally, there was a group of women whose suitors had left them. Four had been unmarried, of whom one had married her suitor in Malaysia; two had divorced
before coming to Malaysia. Their relationships did not last and the grief was often profound. One was heartbroken over her lost love and lost izzat. In addition, most of these women had lost a lot of money to the men they had envisioned marrying.

Rahana’s story is exemplifying. Rahana was a young woman who had identified herself to us as being unmarried; however, we later found out that she had been divorced shortly after she had been married prior to coming to Malaysia. During earlier discussions it had become clear that she had come to Malaysia because she wanted to help her family financially and also hoped to earn their respect and love that way. In Malaysia, a friendly man from her home district in Bangladesh had befriended her. They talked on the phone, and once or twice a month he took her to the market on a Saturday afternoon. Everybody knew about their relationship. Her parents had been informed; they had reluctantly given their permission as he had promised to marry her. Then his family called him back. As his father was said to be ill, they needed money for his treatment. Rahana lent him 9000 ringgits, a large part of which she had borrowed from other women. He stayed for six months. Later, they heard through the grapevine that he had married another woman while in Bangladesh. Sabina, Rahana’s friend, recalled:

At first, we thought he had cheated her all along. But actually his parents had played a trick on him. They did not want him to marry Rahana. They saw her picture and said she was kalo [black, i.e. having a dark complexion]. His father was not sick. Now he has come back to Malaysia and he wants to see Rahana. He still wants to marry her, and he says he wants to give her all her money back.

Rahana told us that she had no intention of seeing him again; all was lost. She sighed. ‘What should I do? Marry him and destroy the life of the other woman? And become a second wife?’ Since everybody had known about their engagement, including her family back home, she had lost not only an enormous amount of money, but also her prestige and izzat. Needless to say, she was devastated: ‘I am dead already.’

Rahana’s story is not an isolated case; several other women had had similar experiences. Many of the women had spent several thousand ringgits helping their potential grooms, often so that they could obtain new permits and passports, as had many of the women who were ‘unsure’ concerning the course of their relationship (the category discussed above). Some of the potential grooms had absconded from their factories because of low wages and the hope of earning more elsewhere; others had wanted to stay on after their visas expired in order to be with their partners. In some cases the engagement had been broken off because the parents disapproved of the marriage; in other cases, it seemed that the man had never seriously intended to marry the woman in the first place. It seems that for a few men, promising marriage and sweet-talking women into sharing their wages with them was an easy way to supplement their meagre wages.

16. We knew a few more women who had had experienced abandonment; however, they chose to not talk about their misfortune with us, which we respected. Their stories are therefore not included here.
Hence, although the women criticized each other and carefully represented themselves as adhering to hegemonic gender norms, many of them sought, individually and privately, to renegotiate those norms, by melding Malaysian ways of being and doing – and thus of courtship – with their own culture’s goal of marriage. Bennett (2005:103), who studied young single women in eastern Indonesia, put it another way: women may support oppressive systems through their silence and public performance, but may simultaneously subvert and transform the nature of those systems privately. As seen in this section, it seems that this worked out well for quite a number of the women. For others, though, things had not evolved as envisioned. It is not possible to establish why it worked out for some and not for others without venturing into the field of psychology, which is beyond the scope of this study. A few observations can, however, be made.

Of the women we spoke to, more divorced women than unmarried women had been abandoned or deceived. This appears to reflect the relatively lower level of social respect that divorcees generally receive. While perhaps a chicken or egg issue, those who were happily engaged or married were strong, self-confident women who radiated an air of ‘don’t mess with me’ – and no-one did. Although they did not overrule their partners and acted as honourable and respectful wives or wives-to-be in accordance with Bangladeshi gender norms, they had a clear say in the conditions under which their relationships took shape. This hypothesis requires more research, but it appears that those who saw themselves as powerful and as being in charge of their own lives and destinies had a better chance of ending up in sustainable and balanced relationships than did women who feared their powerlessness and unfortunate endings. Some of the women who had been deceived admitted that they had given in too easily to pressure from the men or their peers. As Marium explained above, to prevent gossip, decisions were taken hastily. Although the ideal of no dowry payment as mentioned earlier was often referred to, ironically many women had succumbed to paying money to show her commitment and affection, hoping to bind the man to her. In some cases, it appeared that women had felt that they could make up for not engaging physically with their suitors by financially assisting them.

Combining social customs of the ‘here’ and the ‘there’ while holding an unfavourable social position compared to their countrymen, left many women feeling vulnerable and torn by inner conflict. While several men respected the women they were with, others did not. Women’s and men’s internalized notions of traditional gender roles often perpetuated unequal gender relations.

8.7 Staying on

At the time of our second extended fieldwork in Malaysia, the women had been in Malaysia for an average of four years and the men for five years. Many migrants knew that their employers were only willing to extend their contracts for about another year. Most of the migrants I talked to would have liked to stay in Malaysia for a couple of years longer, if not indefinitely. An obvious reason was the desire and need
to earn more money, as wages were lower than had been expected (cf. Ishida & Hassan 2000). As Rita, a young unmarried woman who had gone to Malaysia to earn for her family, said: ‘I have two older sisters. I have sent golden jewellery and money, but I was unable to send money for their dowries. That is why my life is hell.’

Some of the women said that so far they had been sending money to their families, and that now it was time to save something for themselves, so that they would have something to fall back on when times got rough or unexpected situations arose. They also needed to save up to buy the gifts they were expected to bring back upon their return. Wanting to stay on was not at variance with missing the homeland. While many of the women admired Malaysia economically and socioculturally, they missed desh (their homeland): spiritually, there was nothing that surpassed desh. This was also expressed in food. Many had food items sent to them, such as pickles; food from their desh was dearly missed (cf. Gardner 1993).

However, money was not the only reason many women did not want to return home yet: some simply preferred their lives in Malaysia over what they expected upon their return to Bangladesh. As Josna, a divorced woman without children, said: ‘At home I need to listen to my relatives’ comments all the time. Here I can work, earn my money and have my peace.’

Men, on the other hand, never desired to stay longer simply because they enjoyed being in Malaysia; earning more money was usually their only incentive to stay on. Most men were troubled by the generally hostile and condescending attitude of Malaysians towards their presence in the country. Although women were also confronted with this attitude, they were far less likely to be publicly harassed, humiliated, robbed or forced to pay bribes than were the Bangladeshi men. This tendency can be witnessed in other host societies, and appears to be related to the fact that migrant men are perceived to be a far greater threat to the local population than migrant women.

While the men’s sociocultural space and social position had decreased since their arrival in Malaysia, the women’s had increased significantly. Several studies on migrant communities in the USA came to similar conclusions: while many of the men wanted to return to their home country at some point, many of the women preferred to stay in the host country, as they enjoy the greater personal freedom and gender equality (Grasmuck & Pessar 1991; Espín 1999:24).

Many of the unmarried women we spoke to received letters from their parents and siblings urging them to come home soon, and saying that it was them they wanted to see, not their money. However, the women did not want to return, as they were fairly sure that they would be married off to men who were not of their choosing. Some of them had made their own marriage plans, as discussed above. Others had no engagements with men in Malaysia, and did not want to marry and be ‘under the control of a man’, as Azma, an unmarried woman, put it. If she had her way, she would never marry, but she knew her parents would not agree. Thus, she tried to stay away for as long as she could. The money argument was still applied to explain why they did not want to return yet. Though it was no longer a convincing argument, parents and other relatives demanding their return had little power to get them to come back.
The women were generally content with their lives in Malaysia. Nevertheless, while for the time being many had succeeded in staying on despite relatives’ pressure for their early return, the situation created much tension and stress for many of the women. They could not postpone their return indefinitely. Furthermore, many missed their parents and siblings, and it was agony to hurt them. For the women with children, the story was different: being separated from their children was excruciating. They contemplated and hoped to return soon, since it was legally impossible to bring their children to Malaysia. These women stayed longer to earn for their children’s future. Some children also urged their mothers to return. Their pleas were more likely to be heeded, although the decision was often a difficult one.

8.8 Conclusion

This chapter highlighted the ways in which the migrant women’s sociocultural orientations are bifocal while living in Malaysia. While the issue is rarely the focus of academic studies, temporary migrants maintain an acute focus on their home country, since they are not permitted to settle down in the host country and know that they will return after several years.

While both Bangladesh and Malaysia are Islamic countries, the gender norms in the two societies differ. Most of the Bangladeshi women appreciated Malaysia’s enlarged gendered space for women, especially women’s right to work and the relatively large amount of social respect and small amount of public criticism that Malaysian women receive. This impacted their lives on all levels: the domain of self, the household domain and the community domain. As is so often the case in migrant communities (Espín 1999; Morokvasic 2003, Mahler & Pessar 2006), Bangladeshi migrant men criticized their countrywomen for adapting to their host country’s gender roles. Men often felt that since moving to Malaysia they had lost in terms of social status and prestige.

Their countrywomen’s bodies and their sexuality became a site of struggle over the perseverance of traditional values and fear of loss of power. The strong reactions of many of the men should be understood in the context of disappointments in the domain of work (low wages) and the wider social environment of the host society (discrimination and verbal abuse). Clinging to the allegedly superior morals of their home society as exemplified by the domesticity of their women served to preserve their sense of identity and self-esteem. To many women, being exposed to an alternative social system in which Malaysian women had privileges they desired for themselves, gave rise to a vocabulary and confidence that many had not had before. Their social space had increased.

Bangladeshi women were not unaffected by the domineering discourse within their (predominantly male) community that being a Bangladeshi migrant women equalled being ‘immoral’. Despite the fact that many of the women felt that they observed purdah and honoured their izzat, conflicts occurred on the level of self. First, many women were worried about how their community and society would perceive them upon their return. Second, some of the women were sometimes tor-
mented over their self-image, namely over what was ‘right’ and what was ‘wrong’ in light of their own sociocultural background. Although it might feel inherently right to do things in a certain ‘Malaysian’ way, public critique could suddenly fan internalized conventional Bangladeshi notions on appropriate behaviour for women and could lead to inner conflict, including the fear of God’s possible wrath. Third, anxiety and fear about how they would be perceived publicly, frequently led to an intense desire to present themselves to us as particularly chaste women. The extent to which the women were socioculturally embedded in Bangladeshi culture is exemplified by the fact that they too often perpetuated public discourse by criticizing women, hence reproducing social confinements imposed on them. Although many women strongly believed in self-determination and defined purdah as a ‘state of mind’, many were reluctant to grant to others the space they desired for themselves.

While inner conflicts over original versus newly acquired gendered perceptions did not disappear, they did seem to become less urgent over time. Many women knew what they wanted, and strategized towards this end. The decisions they made were the ones they found the most strategic and most satisfying. While keeping in mind the well-being of their families at home, they integrated into their new lives the opportunities offered by their new environment. Families at home were often missed, and for some it was painful to be so far away from those they trusted the most. In general, however, many of the women appreciated the enlarged space of self-determination and took pride in the social skills that they said they had acquired.

Courtship and marriage were particular examples in which Bangladeshi gender norms were renegotiated by the Bangladeshi women and men in Malaysia. While it worked out for several couples, courting entailed risks for women. If things went wrong they were severely stigmatized. In cases where things had not turned out as desired, men had left women, sometimes taking large amounts of their money. There were several factors at play: some were pressured by relatives to marry someone else; others did not respect the women as their equal, or regarded courting or marriage as an economic opportunity. Simultaneously, despite their general criticism of the dowry system many women had sought to ‘hook’ a man by giving him large amounts of money, not uncommonly against their better judgement.

The situation would likely have been a different one had remaining in Malaysia and becoming a Malaysian citizen been an option. It is unclear whether many of the Bangladeshi women would have stayed in Malaysia indefinitely, as several said they would like to do. Having this option would, however, have increased their perceptual fallback position: if things went wrong with family or husbands, they could have looked after themselves by living and working in Malaysia. This was no option under the current migration regime.

A justified question is: did going to another place lead to being in a different gendered space – or did migration turn out to be a mere transplantation of the own gendered discourse to another place? Going to Malaysia, in my opinion, was not merely a transplantation of Bangladeshi norms and values to a different environment. While the process of adjusting to a new life abroad was not easy for the women (the process was often characterized by struggle) and did not turn out well for everyone, it did give rise to new opportunities and experiences that in themselves
were often treasured. Despite strong social opposition, new avenues were carved out. As is generally the case during life-changing and intense events, many women felt that they had changed, grown, in some way or another. How this impacted their lives upon their return is looked into in the following chapter.
CHAPTER 9: BACK IN BANGLADESH: A NEW BEGINNING?

This chapter focuses on the lives and situations of the Bangladeshi migrant women after their return to Bangladesh. Obvious questions concern whether and, if so, to what extent their goals had been achieved.

The study of return migration remains peripheral to migration studies (Guarnizo 1997:286). So far, in-depth research on returned migrant women’s lives in Asia has also been sparse. Most of the studies that have been undertaken specifically looked at the economic outcome of returned migrant women’s migration and are primarily based on surveys (cf. Chantavanich et al. 2001). As the findings in this chapter show, the migration effects can differ widely depending on a woman’s earnings, socio-economic background and individual decisions concerning the allocation of her wages. The general adverse perception of women’s migration (as well as of single women or female-headed households per se) pose challenges for many a returned migrant. While often huge, however, these challenges are not necessarily insurmountable. As seen in Chapter 5, economic incentives for migration cannot be seen in isolation from social incentives; they are interrelated. Migrant women’s economic desires are closely interlinked with social aspirations to safeguard their (and their children’s) future. Likewise, the effects of migration and the fulfilment of these goals are also interlinked. Instead of considering migration as either positive or negative, the data highlights the fact that the consequences of migration extend beyond the economic realm and are contingent on the contexts in which they are embedded (cf. Guarnizo 1997:287). In the case of returned Bangladeshi migrant women, the context was gendered.

As described in Chapter 4, I met in Bangladesh many of the women I had interviewed in Malaysia. In the same community in Dhaka, I also met a few other women returnees I had not seen in Malaysia.1 In 2004, Farhana – my research assistant – revisited and interviewed several women; I joined her for some of these interviews. In 2006, Farhana once more conducted follow-up interviews with several of the women (see table 9.5 the end of this chapter). The findings presented in this chapter underline the importance of longitudinal in-depth studies on returned migrants. Here, I first look at the level and the allocation of remittances during women’s absence, and then turn to the investments some of the women made after their return. For analytical purposes, economic and social incentives and goals are discussed separately.

1. It was beyond the scope of this study to also consistently collect data on returned migrant men in Bangladesh. It was time intensive to find and visit migrant women in their various villages and communities.
9.1 Remittances

Migrant workers’ remittances often serve to cover the costs of daily life that cannot be met through local activities. It is not always easy to evaluate the meaning and impact of remittances (Cohen 2005:103). Very few studies have disaggregated remittances by the sex of the remitters, let alone work towards a comprehensive gendered analysis (Mahler & Pessar 2006:44; King et al. 2006:409).

Generally speaking, every three or four months the women would send money home; mostly 10,000-20,000 takas (approximately 200-400 euros) 2, depending on what they could afford. 3 Most of the women sent their money via the informal hundi system, which is based on a network of middlemen and contact persons at both ends. Bangladeshis and other South Asian migrants all over Asia use this system. It is generally preferred over formal banking systems because it is fast, cheaper and trusted (Puri & Ritzema 1999:6; Bruyn & Kuddus 2005:31). While the study by Siddiqui (2000) found that migrant women generally claimed to use official channels (82%), our study came to different conclusions.

Box 9.1: Nazma’s homecoming – I

A sudden departure 4

Malaysia, April 2001: Nazma had been in Malaysia for 5 years; soon she would turn 23. The company 5 had promised to keep her and her colleagues on for one more year – provided they passed the medical test. Six years was the maximum time they were allowed to employ temporary migrants. Nazma had resolved to stay for one more year as she needed to earn more money. She felt that her brother had wasted all the money she had sent him. He had not reacted to the angry, tape-recorded letter she had recently sent him. He had promised to buy some land in her name and now word had come to her that he had leased the land to obtain a visa for himself to go to Saudi Arabia – ‘Mind you,’ she said, ‘my land!’ She had told him to wait for her to settle things. He had not listened. Earlier, she had tried to get a visa for him to come to Malaysia, as he had asked her to. She had paid 2000 ringgits but had never got the visa. Her friend Rashid told her not to worry, that he would take care of it. But she was not so sure; it had also happened to others.

Nazma and her 31 Bangladeshi colleagues were relieved: the results of the medical exam had arrived. They had all passed and so would be able to stay on for one more year. The sense of relief, however, did not last very long. The following morning, ‘Madam’ – the human resources manager – called a meeting. She told them, with a grave expression on her face, that their

---

2. Approximately, 100 taka = 2 euro.
3. This section is largely based on the survey conducted in Malaysia.
4. Nazma’s story is exemplified in several boxes throughout this chapter. Farhana and I had set out to visit Nazma in her village, as we had heard of her expected return. We were in her village when she returned from 5 years in bidesh. For Nazma’s reasons for migration, see also 5.5: Getting away from marriage negotiations.
5. Factory II. For more information on factory II, see Chapter 7.
visas had not been renewed: the factory was not doing well and would have to close down within a few months. They could not believe it. This was impossible! Production had just started to pick up again! Nazma was as shocked as the others. They were not at all prepared to leave. Although they had been buying some goods and gifts to take back home, it was not nearly enough – nor was the amount of money they had saved! They had only 21 days to prepare for their departure. Relatives needed to be informed so they would be able to make arrangements to be picked up at the airport; they also needed to say goodbye and to purchase gifts. They cried for days, Nazma later told her aunt. There was nothing they could do about it; their time was up. However, the factory did not close down: it remained operating for years to come. According to the women, the company had received a new batch of Indonesian workers, prior to the departure of the Bangladeshi women. They suspected that their early departure was linked to the arrival of the new women: Indonesian women were cheaper than Bangladeshi women since the latter had been receiving annual wage increases for the past 5 years.

The migrant women in Malaysia largely preferred this informal channel, as bank forms were said to be complicated, exchange rates lower and the fees high. Moreover, most of the relatives in villages in Bangladesh did not have a bank account. As other studies also found, the confidence established through knowing people face to face as compared to an anonymous banking system also played a crucial role, although there were still transaction costs (Siddiqui & Abrar 2001:v). We found that at times, and partly to cut down on costs, migrants trusted individuals to carry money or gold jewellery for them when they returned home; in several cases, however, these items were never delivered.

Most of the migrant women remitted most of their wages: on the one hand, it was needed back home, and on the other hand, many did not want to keep large amounts of money in their Malaysian bank accounts. It was not that they mistrusted Malaysian banks; on the contrary, once migrants were familiar with it, the computerized system was valued and most became comfortable using cash dispensers and the like. However, it was feared that if they were unexpectedly sent home, there might not be sufficient time or the chance to withdraw their savings. Although some women saved money in their Malaysian accounts, many felt more comfortable once the money was back in Bangladesh. Since they generally did not have their own bank accounts in Bangladesh, they sent their savings to their relatives.

At the time of the survey, the women had been in Malaysia for an average of 43 months and had remitted an average of 153,776 takas (3075 euros). Thus, the average monthly remittance was 3576 takas (72 euros) and the average annual remittance 42,912 takas (858 euros). Interestingly, Siddiqui (2000:67) in her survey amongst 200 returned migrant women and their families in Bangladesh came to a very similar annual figure, namely 45,126 takas.6

---

6. Siddiqui’s survey in Bangladesh was conducted at about the same time as our survey in Malaysia. The vast majority of the women in her survey had worked in the Middle East; less then a quarter had
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factory</th>
<th>Products</th>
<th>Average number of months in Malaysia at time of survey</th>
<th>Average of the total amount of remittances sent per worker in taka</th>
<th>Average of the total net remittances sent per worker in taka (minus migration fee paid)</th>
<th>Average remittance per worker per month in taka</th>
<th>Average net remittance per worker per month in taka</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factory I</td>
<td>Electronics components</td>
<td>34 (N=36)</td>
<td>134,666</td>
<td>68,148</td>
<td>3960</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory II</td>
<td>Electronics components + consumer electronics</td>
<td>41 (N=23)</td>
<td>89,113</td>
<td>26,068</td>
<td>2100</td>
<td>635</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory III</td>
<td>Branded high-quality garments</td>
<td>47 (N=45)</td>
<td>230,789</td>
<td>140,142</td>
<td>4910</td>
<td>2982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory IV</td>
<td>High-quality ladies underwear</td>
<td>49 (N=18)</td>
<td>173,461</td>
<td>129,792</td>
<td>3540</td>
<td>2649</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Quite understandably, most women regarded these remittances as ‘profit’ only once the migration fee had been fully recouped. After deducting the costs of migration, at that point in time the women had sent 85,950 takas (1719 euros) in total – an average of only 1999 takas (40 euros) a month. It is not surprising that the women found this a disappointingly low amount: they had expected to be able to remit several thousand takas a month. By way of comparison, the average wage (wage, not savings) of a garment worker in the factories in Dhaka was about 1900 takas at the time (personal communications with garment workers).

In table 9.1 the figures on remittances are disaggregated by the factories that the women worked at. The figures reveal a stark difference in the value of remittances sent by women at the different factories. Although other variables may also be at play, I argue that this likely reflects the differences in wages between factories as discussed in Chapter 7. Factory 2 paid the lowest wages and, not surprisingly, the net remittances sent by the women working at that factory (635 takas) are by far the lowest.

While these figures largely explain why many migrant women who worked at factory 2 felt that their move to Malaysia was not very profitable, most of the women were able to save money.

---

7. 87% of all the women interviewed worked in one of these four factories. The women who worked in other factories generally earned less than average.
The money was usually sent to a father, husband, mother, or close and trusted relative. In cases where the relationship with the husband was estranged, the money would be sent to the immediate family. Several women heard via letters from home that their remittances had been misused. This is a common problem reported by other migrant women in Asia (Gamburd 200:181). Whenever possible, women would send their remittances to other relatives; only a few kept the money in their own bank accounts.

### 9.2 Allocation of remittances

In the survey held in Malaysia, 57% of the women said that they knew how their remittances were spent by those back home, 25% said that they partially knew and 18% said that they did not know at all. Table 9.2 shows the different categories that the remittances were spent on. Some women knew the exact breakdown of the expenses, but as most did not, no amounts are given. In most cases a large part of the money was spent on daily expenditures, for example food, clothing and doctor’s bills. This was often referred to as the money that had been ‘eaten up’. It reflects the socio-economic situation of many migrant women’s households. This is in line with the allocation of remittances of female and male migrant workers in Asia in general (Eelens 1992; Puri & Ritzema 1999:10; Asis 2001; Chantavanich 2001; Cohen 2005). Siddiqui’s (2000:67) survey among the receivers of remittances from female migrants in Bangladesh, found that 56% of the remittances were spent on daily expenditures, healthcare and education. In our study we found that 59% of all women sent remittances for daily expenditures (see table 9.2).

Land was a popular investment (39% of all the women had invested in land), as were building or repairing a house (23%), educating children (23%) and investing in a family business (17%). The last-mentioned would mostly involve minor investments, such as buying poultry etc. In rare cases, investment implied buying or renting a shop. Of the women, 10% helped to finance the dowry and wedding of a sister or daughter, and 8% spent money on repaying debts. The contributions towards these specific ends does not always imply that the costs of the expenses needed for the specific transaction (e.g. buying a plot of land or paying for a sister’s dowry) were entirely covered by the respondent’s remittances; sometimes money was pooled from other income sources the family had access to. In a later section, a closer look is taken at the investments made and the objectives and implications of those investments.

---

8. It is interesting to note that although several studies find that the relationships with husbands are said to be okay, a third of the women sent their savings to their parents (Asis 2001; Sukamdi 2001).

9. Siddiqui (200:67) found that of the total amount remitted, on average 3% was spent on land, 2% was invested in a business, 4% was used to send someone else to bidesh and 5% was spent on social ceremonies and dowries. Hence, although some could have invested quite a bit in these activities, on average the amounts spent on them were relatively low.
Table 9.2: Allocation of remittances

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spending of remittances</th>
<th>Number of women’s relatives who had allocated part of the remittances to this end</th>
<th>Percentage of women’s relatives who had allocated part of the remittances to this end</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily expenditures</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repairing/buying a house</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education children</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migration of other relatives</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family business purposes</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dowry for sisters or daughters</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repaying loans</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>95 women</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As mentioned, while many women knew how the money was spent, 25% knew only partly and 18% did not know. It was often said that they would ‘never ask’ what the money was spent on. However, it was also said that those back home would tell them what they had done with the money or would regularly ask for the migrant’s advice. The relative ignorance concerning the allocation of remittances seems to substantiate the dutiful daughter/altruistic mother argument. The data obtained regarding the decision-making process for the allocation of remittances seem to further support this argument, as table 9.3 shows.

Table 9.3: Decision making concerning the allocation of remittances

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision making</th>
<th>Number of cases</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents, husband or brother</td>
<td>79 cases</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent together with family members</td>
<td>23 cases</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent</td>
<td>12 cases</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone of the extended family</td>
<td>6 cases</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>120</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
* 19 respondents were not asked questions related to the expenditure of their remittances

Of the women, 10% said that they had personally decided how remittances were spent, while 19% said that the decision making had been a joint effort. Hence, only 29% of the women seemed to have had some degree of say in the spending of the remittances. Siddiqui (2000:85) found that most women sent money home as they had no bank accounts of their own. Their families did not seem to think that the migrant women had first dibs on the money:

On the numerous occasions where the migrant women expressed an opinion how the money should be disposed of, their wishes were rarely honoured by their families. In many cases, the families used up their earnings by the time the women returned from abroad. (Ibid.)
Our study found that upon their return, many migrant women were disappointed at the way all or part of their remittances had been spent during their absence (see also Gamburd 2000:181). Many had not had a clear say on the allocation of their income while they had been away. The figures given in table 9.3, however, do not necessarily reflect powerlessness or passiveness in terms of deciding how the remittances were spent. Once more, the answers given regarding the decision-making power over remittances partly concealed the other aspects, motivations and dynamics that are at play.

First, some of the survey answers reflected socially correct notions and answers. Ideal-typically, a woman does not interfere in decisions about spending; this is part of the male domain. In practice, however, the dynamics can be very different. For example, in the survey, Nazma said that her elder brother decided on how remittances were spent and that she was being ‘informed’ about it. As her words in boxes 9.1 and 9.2 show, however, this was only part of the story. She had asked him to buy land in her name, and he had done so – but he later leased it out for his own benefit. She was understandably furious. Preliminary answers to the question regarding decision making on remittances partly seemed to reflect socioculturally correct behaviour. Remittances are a sensitive issue (cf. Mazzucato et al. 2005).

Second, a substantial part of the remittances had to be spent on daily expenditures and the needs of those left behind, as is the case with the remittances sent by male migrant workers. It should also be noted that most migrant men who were part of their father’s or elder brother’s household or extended household did not have much decision-making power over the remittances they sent either (personal communications with migrant men). Migrant women and men often wanted to ‘first do something for the family’: they wanted to make sure that they were provided for, before looking after themselves. Their drive to help their families was fuelled as much by feelings of caring as by feelings of responsibility.

Third, remitting large amounts to a guardian is often part of a conscious strategy to strengthen ties. Likewise, in a study among migrant men and women from rural Thailand, Vanwey (2004:754) found that remittances from women to their families were partly made to make up for the lack of social control their relatives had over them.

Fourth, not all of the money was sent. Although many had said in the survey that their fathers handled the money and they did not know exactly what had been bought, we later found that at some point women had stopped sending money in order to save more for themselves. Table 9.4 presents an estimate of the approximate amount of money women had left each month after deducting remittances and living costs. It should be noted that when their departure had approached, many women had ceased to send back money. Living costs were on average 150 ringgits per month. Many of those with low earnings, such as the women in factory 2, tried to spend less. Those who earned more, such as the women in factories 3 and 4, allowed themselves to live less frugally; they spent about 200 ringgits per month. Table 9.4 shows that women in factories 3 and 4 had more money at their disposal. For the women in factories 1 and 2, this was far less the case. Part of this money was spent
on buying gifts to give to relatives when they returned, widely perceived to be a social ‘must’.

Table 9.4: Monthly earnings, living costs and remittances (in ringgits)\(^{10}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average income*</th>
<th>Living costs</th>
<th>Average remittance per month</th>
<th>Net monthly earnings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factory 1</td>
<td>509</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>305 (3960 takas)</td>
<td>55 (715 takas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory 2</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>161 (2100 takas)</td>
<td>29 (337 takas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory 3</td>
<td>781</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>377 (4910 takas)</td>
<td>204 (2652 takas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory 4</td>
<td>584</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>272 (3540 takas)</td>
<td>112 (1456 takas)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* After deductions made by the company for EPF and the levy (see discussion in Chapter 7)

Table 9.4 shows that although the women who earned more sent larger sums, the remittances did not grow at the same pace as the wages. Those who earned more could keep a substantial part for themselves. Particularly the women in factories 3 and 4 bought things for themselves, including gold jewellery, clothing and mobile phones for their immediate use in Malaysia. They also occasionally treated themselves to Kentucky Fried Chicken, which is expensive in Malaysia but very popular among migrant women. There was also a group of women who had sent hardly any money home. To them, migration had been a way of ‘opting out’ from undesirable situations; many of their families did not need their money. They mostly spent their money as they deemed fit. Thus, even if the fee had not yet been repaid fully or loved ones had asked for more, these women spent money on things they wanted to do and have. In line with Wolf (1992), it can be concluded that migrant factory women do not earn just for their families, but also pursue their own desires. However, the women who earned less and came from families with dire needs generally lived as frugally as they could. Here, a study by Ishida and Hassan (2000:104) among Bangladeshi migrant men working in manufacturing in Malaysia can provide a comparison. The researchers calculated the men’s average monthly wages and average monthly remittances, namely 707 ringgits and 378 ringgits, respectively. The latter sum is slightly larger than the amount remitted by the women in this study who earned approximately the same wages.

Vanwey (2004:754) found in her study among migrants from rural Thailand that women were more altruistic than men in sending remittances. As was seen in our study, she also found that the remittances were larger when the income level of the household was lower. Men generally came from higher income families, relatively speaking, a fact that is probably related to the level of their remittances. More research is needed to understand patterns and the volume of remittances sent by male and female migrants.

---

\(^{10}\) When these figures were collected in the summer of 1999, the exchange rate was 1 ringgit = 13 takas.
Box 9.2: Nazma’s homecoming – II

On the plane back from Malaysia to Bangladesh, May 2001

The final few days in Malaysia had been extremely hectic and all the women had been tense. Everybody had way too much to bring back. Nazma had been anxious about the money she had to pay for her excess baggage – a couple of hundred ringgits. She had a big suitcase, a medium-size suitcase, two big boxes, a sports bag and a bag containing two blankets – one for herself and one for her mother. Her last month’s wage had been eaten up by the excess baggage charge.

On the plane, her mind drifted away. She felt miserable. She was worried. Rashid, the man who had helped her find an agent, had told her on the phone not to worry. He had paid 2000 ringgits to the agent. He promised he’d take care of it and get the money back. She liked Rashid; he’d been really nice ever since she met him. He was smart. They had talked so much about all her worries and anxieties; it had been such a relief. Their friendship had grown. One day he had said that he wanted to marry her. To prove his interest in her he had introduced her to his two uncles, who lived in Malaysia. But she was no longer so sure about his feelings. She wondered if he really would marry her; he had lied to her about several other things. Would she ever get her money back? Her heart ached. She was angry with him and perhaps with herself, too. How could she have trusted him? Once again, she decided she needed to be independent and earn money for herself.

She had been trying to contact Rashid for days. He had said that he was busy but would come to see her before she left and would pay back her money then. He never showed up. Finally, the day before, she had gone to his house to look for him. His room-mate told her that he was not in. He said that Rashid did not plan to give her the money back. He wanted to be sure that she would wait for him and not marry someone else before he returned to Bangladesh. This made her even more upset. Worst of all, he had not even come to say goodbye to her; it hurt. He would stay in Malaysia until December. Would he really come to her village to marry her, as he had promised? Her mind wandered to thoughts of her village. Had they received her letter and be waiting for her at the airport? She hoped so: she had so much luggage. She had tried to call the shopkeeper near her aunt’s house, but had not managed to get through.

The square in front of Dhaka airport was filled with people. One by one, her colleagues spotted their families in the crowd; tears of joy flowed. Nazma’s family was not there. She tried unsuccessfully to hold back her tears. She had tried to call the shopkeeper near her aunt’s house, but had not managed to get through.

The scene changed quickly as more and more people arrived and help Nazma off the rickshaw. They set off, her luggage barely fitting on the rickshaw.

Being back in the familiar countryside made her feel peculiar. A wave of panic swept over her; she tried to relax by thinking of her plans to find a good job. She needed to find a job in the city. She needed to take care of herself, so her relatives will not marry her off. But first she needed to see her mother.

The neighbours’ children were the first to see her. ‘She’s arrived!’ they shouted. ‘She’s arrived!’ Her aunt came running, along with her brother. The scene changed quickly as more and more people arrived and help Nazma off the rickshaw. Then she saw her mother slowly approaching her through the crowd. Nazma was startled: her mother looked so old and frail.
After the first hellos had been said and her luggage had been carried into the mud house, Nazma made her way through the crowd. She burst into tears. Why hadn’t anybody picked her up at the airport? She was the only one alone! Her aunt [her father’s sister], an astute and influential woman who lived next door, tried to comfort her. They had been waiting for her phone call; it all had been a misunderstanding.

Several hours later, Nazma sat down with her mother and aunt to eat dinner. She complained about the rice being hard and the water having a strange taste. Her aunt tried to soothe her. ‘You have been away for five years,’ she said. ‘You will need some time to get used to things here.’ Earlier, Nazma had walked around the home, inspecting the place. She was concerned by what she had seen. Nothing had improved; in fact, it had deteriorated. The house had not been well kept; there were cracks in the earth walls. Several of the old trees had been cut down and the cows and goats were gone; there were hardly any chickens left either. Her brother had sold it all in order to buy his visa. ‘We used to have 10 cows, 18 goats and several valuable trees worth 10,000 takas each,’ she told us. Why hadn’t her brothers been working the land properly? She had asked her youngest brother: why had Jamal, her older brother, left for bidesh? He had left 28 days earlier. ‘He was just stubborn,’ her younger brother replied. Now the news had come from Saudi Arabia that he was stranded: the agent had cheated him and it was likely that he would be sent home any day now. It was such a disaster! He had wasted 200,000 takas! All in all, Nazma had sent 190,000 takas to her family. Some money had been used to pay off her loan, and the rest had been used on daily expenditures and to buy land – her land, which was now largely leased out. She figured that her brother had also paid for his second marriage with her money. When she first heard that he was wasting her money, she began sending it to her sister. However, her sister had passed it on to her brother, she had just learnt. Her sister’s rationale had been that if he spent it properly, she would be able to get back the money she had lent him earlier. Nazma felt it had all been wasted: she had hardly any savings left. If only she had not given the money to Rashid! And then there was the 30,000 takas she had lost last year when someone claimed they would bring the money back home for her… ‘How could I have trusted them all?’ she thought. ‘My fortune is bad!’ she told her mother. ‘I tried hard to develop myself but I did not succeed.’

9.3 Money and gender

The discussion in the previous section was largely based on the data we collected while the women were still in Malaysia. In Bangladesh we aimed to amend this data. Although we thought that this process would be relatively straightforward, it turned out to be a daunting task: after several conversations and informal interviews with individual women and their relatives concerning remittances, investments, losses and savings, it became clear that the figures given often differed from conversation to conversation, depending on the context of the story told. Nevertheless, the figures presented in the previous sections give important indications regarding earnings, remittances and, to some extent, decision making and the allocation of remittances, especially since other researchers came to similar findings (Siddiqui 2001; Ishida & Hassan 2000). However, there is more to the money issue.
There are several underlying reasons for the partiality and fluctuations in the figures and ‘money stories’ told. First, on a practical level, not all the women noted the exact amounts of money spent or sent. Jewellery, goods and gifts were bought whenever there was some money left over; later, it was not always easy to calculate the total costs. Second, some women did not want to reveal exact figures or they wanted to make things seem better or worse, depending on the context. At times, giving ‘incorrect’ or incomplete figures was due to feelings of shame and embarrassment: the respondent had lost a lot of money by making a mistake or an unwise investment. At other times, overestimating or underestimating a figure served to underline a point a woman was trying to make, thus ‘proving’ her position vis-à-vis someone or a goal she had in mind. The symbolic value of the figure given often proved to be more important than the actual one. In other instances, the stories told were those that were socially preferred or regarded as safe and appropriate. This was sometimes related to the fact that there were other people – relatives, neighbours and/or children – listening to the conversation.11

Similar to the point made in Chapter 5 concerning women’s motivations for migration, respondents were not necessarily lying but presenting themselves in ways that made the most sense to them. This was not surprising, given the social sensitivity of the topic. Money is not an uncharged, neutral variable; the partial or inconsistent representations regarding money issues are culturally and socially embedded. Our study found that the allocation of the migration revenues – or women’s decision-making power (or lack thereof) over such revenues – is intrinsically linked to women’s social goals and gendered room to manoeuvre. We were only marginally successful in establishing the women’s exact expenditures, losses and investments, but it was more interesting and important to understand the dynamics that were at stake, namely the motivations and the obstacles faced concerning the allocation of the money earned in bidesh.

In order to obtain their general goal of securing their futures, the migrant women tried to improve their relative bargaining power (their voice) and their fallback position (their long-term security) by strategically allocating their foreign revenues. As discussed in Chapter 2, the strength of a person’s fallback position is regarded as being of particular importance in determining his or her relative bargaining power (Sen 1990). According to Agarwal (1994:62), a person’s fallback position can be defined as that person’s ‘outside options’ to ensure survival and well-being in the case of adversity or disagreements. Factors that determine a person’s fallback position include private ownership and control over such assets as land; access to employment and other income-earning means; access to external social support systems; and access to support from the state or NGOs. Someone’s relative bargaining power is revealed not only by who participates in decision making and who does not, but also by the content of the negotiations. More fundamentally, relative bargaining power is revealed by the interests the outcome of a decision represents (Sen

11. As discussed in Chapter 4, a lot of patience and creativity was often needed on our part to get to talk to someone privately without being rude, and we did not always manage to do so.
Hence, establishing someone’s bargaining position and identifying the factors that determine the outcome of bargaining is a complex process. Using the notion of fallback position in a pragmatic way by looking at migrant women’s allocations of their earnings can be very revealing.

In the Bangladeshi context, a woman’s support of a trustworthy guardian is a pivotal asset and improves her fallback position considerably. Financial contributions or investments were often made in order to ensure the continued protection and support of a guardian and to improve the woman’s fallback position. The power of Bangladeshi women is generally dependent on access to resources as well as male support (Gardner 1994; Kabeer 2000; Hadi 2001).
The allocation of migrant women’s remittances can be summarized as follows:

**Economic goals**

- Paying for daily necessities (incl. loans)
- Buying land/building a house
- Income-generating investments
- Investing in children’s future
- Gifts and consumer goods
- Personal savings
- Human investments

Women’s social goals, which are often intrinsically related to the allocation of remittances and savings, can be summarized as follows:

**Social goals**

**Marriage:**
- A respectable marriage: -A groom of one’s choice (love)
  - Being economically prosperous
  - Having children
  - Having in-laws one gets along with

or:
- A respectable life as a single woman: -being socio-economically independent of husband/ex-husband or relatives

**Children:**
- Living with one’s children and being able to provide for them
- Ensuring a bright future for them

**Enlarged Sociocultural Space:**
- Increased decision-making power regarding one’s own life
- Sociocultural room to generate an income

**Social prestige:**
- Being well-respected in the family and the community (social and symbolic capital)

Each of these aspects is discussed below. Women clearly had a determining say in the actual decision making concerning these investments. Although economic and social goals and investments made towards this end are intrinsically linked, for analytical purposes they are discussed separately. By discussing the economic parameters and women’s incentives, the gendered aspects that are closely related to women’s social objectives become clear.
9.4 Economic aspirations: financial investments made

In Malaysia, 43% of the women had expressed interest in setting up a business upon their return. Their ideas ranged from buying a sewing machine and working as an independent tailor from home, to opening a shop or starting a poultry farm. Most of the women wanted to buy land and, if possible, build a house. A few had the additional aspiration to buy a car. About 13% of the women, mostly widowed mothers, primarily wanted to invest in their children’s education and future marriages. The prime goal of another 13% of the women was to enable a son, brother or husband to go to bidesh. Some had added that they were not sure that these economic aspirations could be fulfilled, given their meagre earnings. Below, a closer look is taken at all the categories the women had spent their money on. Information regarding the various periods in which the data were collected and a summary of the main findings are given in table 9.5 at the end of this chapter.

Investing in land

Bangladeshi migrant workers consider land to be the most sustainable investment: land is scarce and its value continues to increase (Mahmood 1996; Siddiqui 2001:69). Ten of the twenty-nine women we visited in Bangladesh had invested part of their money in land. The women had bought land for various reasons, often in order to build a new house. In five cases it also served as an income-generating investment for rice production.

Owning land is also a way for a woman to increase her personal fallback position and long-term security. For this to happen, the land needs to be in the woman’s own name. Eight of the women had land registered in their name.12 The story of Nazma (box 9.2) illustrates that even if land had been bought in a woman’s name, ‘guardians’ could still have power over it. Generally, however, owning land confirms a woman’s position and increases her bargaining power. For example, Comla (a married woman) had only agreed to come home after her husband had promised to put the land in her name. Comla:

It is a good thing that I now have land in my own name. This land and the house are mine. It’s in my name and nobody can throw me out. Now I can throw people out. So now I have become stronger.

It should be noted, however, that many of the women who had wanted to buy land did not achieve their goal. Many had not earned enough, while others had lost money as a result of earlier decisions or had had their remittances misused. These issues are discussed in a later section. As table 9.5 shows, for most women there was a correlation between buying land and building a house.

12. We were not sure of the situation for the two other women who had land.
Building a house

Building a house in the home country is an important goal for many migrant workers worldwide. Migration studies often cite the luxurious two- or three-storey buildings surrounded by big fences that can be found in remote villages in Morocco, China, the Philippines and elsewhere. Apart from providing shelter and comfortable living conditions, these constructions often display their owners’ success, and hence are symbols of migrants’ success, of their upward social and economic mobility (Garder 1994; Mahmood 1996; de Haas 2003).

Asian migrant women’s remittances are often invested in housing (Chantavanich 2001; Sukamdi 2001; Siddiqui 2001; Gamburd 2000; INSTRAW 2000). Given their moderate level of earnings, the houses they build or extend are often more modest and serve practical purposes, as is also the case for many intra-Asian male migrant workers. Seven of the ten women who had bought land also built a house on it. Five other women had built or rebuilt a house or extra rooms in their fathers’ compounds. The reasons for building houses varied according to the women’s personal situations. For five of the women, buying land and building a house provided a possibility to live away from relatives they had been dependent on – siblings, uncles, aunts or husbands with whom they did not have a good relationship. Having a house meant that they not only had a home for themselves and thus some personal ‘space’, but also that they lived in a ‘place’ outside the dominion of their relatives, which increased their self-reliance and independence – an important goal for these women.

For three of these women, and for three others who built on their relatives’ land, building a house or adding rooms was an investment: the house or rooms could be sublet to tenants or rented out as shops. The investment in these buildings was a source of income. Two other women had extended or rebuilt their houses mainly because they wanted more comfort and space. For all of the women, investing in houses was a way to increase their fallback position. The buildings were valuable assets that were theirs, whether or not they were shared with others. This was particularly topical for five of the women: they had built houses on the land of their fathers or siblings so that they would have a place to return to if their marriages turned sour. Apart from wanting to improve their relatives’ living and income situation, building a house in their families’ compounds was thus also a strategic move.

Shannaz’s case is a good example of this. She had married Kamal shortly after her return from Malaysia; they had met in Malaysia. Although her family was not too happy about her marriage (he had been married before), they consented to it. She

---

13. In a few cases, costs and hence ownership were shared with other family members.
14. One woman (Nahar) was unmarried, two (Shazeda and Hashida) were divorced and two (Hameeda and Salma) were married. Salma’s husband later joined her; they were not estranged.
15. Hashida, Nahar and Shazeda.
16. Although it is custom that women can return to their parental homes and, under Islamic law, also have an inheritance right, many women feel that these options are not sufficient, as the experiences of the divorced women exemplify (see also discussion in Chapter 5).
was about to move to her husband’s village, which was in another district. She told us that she had explained to her husband that she had built the house because her father was poor and it was her duty, since he had helped her to go to bidesh. When we were discussing her house again at a later point in time, she exclaimed:

Can’t you understand why I built a house? It is my security! I do not need to pay for this land. I am also a daughter; I also have a right to this land. So I built a house. My brother will never be able to throw me out if I need to come home. He will say ‘My sister built this house’.

Although her relationship with her husband was good and based on mutual respect, Shannaz felt cautious and a need to secure her position. In an earlier marriage, she had not been treated well. When she had returned home from this first marriage, she had felt the unspoken accusation of her siblings. It was then that she had decided to go to Malaysia. She had owned nothing and felt that she was a burden on her family. As Shannaz explained, she had been determined to prevent this from happening again. If need be, she would be able to return to her family without being ‘a beggar’.

Shannaz and the other women felt that giving all or some of their money to their husbands would not necessarily give them any guarantees; having an asset at their parental homes, however, improved their fallback position. As one woman put it: ‘A husband is like a roof.’ Women knew from ample experiences that this roof might collapse at any time and was an incentive for them to build a ‘roof’ of their own. Men were not always happy about the investments made by their wives-to-be. The women, however, perceived their potential husbands’ acceptance of the matter as one way of ‘testing’ his genuine intentions about her; that is showing that he was not just marrying her for her money.

The houses the women built were usually simple two-room brick constructions. Building these houses was often a struggle. Women building their own houses are a relative novelty; gendered social confines frustrated them and hijacked their endeavours. Although several women actively helped in the construction of their houses, and at times also dealt with contractors or builders, they generally depended on a male guardian to make the arrangements. This was due to the sociocultural norm that women are not supposed to deal with unrelated men. Women who break this norm are often not taken seriously or are cheated. In several cases, obtaining the help of guardians was not a problem; guardians took charge of these affairs. In other cases, however, this process led to tense situations: women were unhappy with the little support they felt they received and the lack of agency they had in dealing with matters directly. Some guardians who helped out expected to gain financially from it, as Nahar’s experience shows (see her story in box 9.4). Female-headed households are often dependent on male mediators and guardians, and are therefore vulnerable to fraud (White 1992:112; Hadi 2001:60).

Hashida, a divorced woman, experienced this vulnerability. She had had a good income in Malaysia. She did not want to ever marry again and was determined to be self-reliant. Her brothers were upset with her: they felt that they had a right to their sister’s earnings based on their blood ties. One had wanted her to give him 200,000
takas to go to the Middle East; the other had wanted her to buy him a car. Hashida refused. She did not see why she had to give her hard-earned money to her ‘lazy brothers’. She was determined to make sustainable investments (in her own name) instead of frivolously spending it on her brothers. This led to considerable tension and quarrels within the family. Hashida agreed to a joint project from which her brother would also profit. They bought land and built a house in a respectable area not far from their village. They would rent out some rooms and the shop space; her brother, a madrasa (religious school) teacher, would live there. Hashida saw it as an investment. She was not sure where she would live. However, the process was tedious and marked by many quarrels during which Hashida was pressured to spend more of her money than she had planned. In the months to come, her family would often blame her for being ‘selfish’ and Hashida felt increasingly socially isolated.

Nevertheless, when we visited Hashida at the construction site in 2001, the house was coming along and Hashida was proud. She asked Farhana to take a photo and told me to show it to her peers in Malaysia, if I happened to go back. She had succeeded: ‘I’ve always said I will build a house – and here it is!’ A broad smile crossed her face.

**Income-generating investments**

As migration studies have variously shown, a large percentage of migrants worldwide aspire to save their earnings to invest in business (Puri & Ritzema, 1999; IN-STRAW 2000; Asis 2001). However, as many studies also show, remittances are mostly spent on household expenditures and durable consumption goods. Generally, not much is left for ‘productive investments’ or income-generating activities – much to the dismay of migrant sending governments (Puri & Ritzema 1999:10; Cohen 2005).

Eleven women invested their money in a way that generated an income; other women had failed to invest successfully. One reason was the level of savings. Many of the women who had made successful investments had left for Malaysia in 1993/4, long before the economic crisis started and wages dropped dramatically. During these earlier years, the migration fees had also been substantially lower. These women had stayed up to six years in Malaysia, had worked in factories with overtime and were paid relatively well. Upon their return they had managed to save (or had remitted) 300,000-400,000 takas (6000-8000 euros).

The level of wages was only one reason for the women’s failure to invest successfully. A lack of knowledge and less well-chosen investment projects also limited the possibilities. There is an urgent need for migrants to receive institutionalized assistance regarding investments. Migrant workers who have no prior business experience cannot be expected to become dynamic entrepreneurs overnight (Puri & Ritzema 1999:16; Siddiqui & Abrar 2001; de Bruyn & Kuddus 2005:46).

The investments made include renting out rooms or shop space, setting up a tailoring business, investing in poultry or other animals, cultivating the land they had obtained, investing in public transport (such as rickshaws and, in one case, a bus), lending money and/or living off interest, and investing in migration fees for sons.
Six women were able to earn some income from renting out a few rooms or a shop. Fahima had brought her sister, Shuli, to Malaysia after she had been there for a year. With her remittances and those of her sister, she had built five small, corrugated-iron houses in her father’s compound. By renting them out, the family earned 2500 takas a month – a welcome addition to the meagre 500 takas wage their father earned in a nearby textile mill. Fahima recalled that she felt ‘like a son’ to her parents. Apart from ensuring that her parents were now well provided for, they had secured their fallback position for when she and her sister would marry and leave their parental home. Five of the women cultivated the land they had purchased; the rice they harvested was sold at the local market and this added to their income. Although most women did not know their exact revenues (or would not disclose them at the time), they appeared to be modest but worthwhile.

Two women invested in raising animals. Comla, who was married, bought a 50,000-taka Australian high-yield milk cow. Half the cost was financed by the money she had brought back, and half by borrowing money from a micro-credit programme. She took care of the cow while her husband went to the market every day to sell the milk. They earned up to 6000 takas a month. Comla was well on her way to paying off her loan and expanding her little farm through more micro-credit financing. Without the micro-credit programme and the support and cooperation of her husband, she would not have been able to start this business.17

Helena, a divorced woman, had invested her savings in buying three rickshaws, which she rented out. The business thrived, and she lived well from the proceeds. While still abroad, Salma Helena had invested some money in her father’s rickshaw repair shop. The business went well and she shared in the profit. Additionally, Salma Helena and Saraswati – two friends who had gone to Malaysia together – each invested several tens of thousands of takas in a tailor shop in order to produce trousers for the local market. However, the business did not take off and they lost all their money.

Three women had invested money in sending their sons to the Middle East or Singapore. They had lost 80,000, 120,000 and 200,000 takas, respectively. In one case, the son never left and the agent did not reimburse the fee; the two others had been sent back shortly after their arrival due to problems with the agent or employer.18 Losing money this way is certainly not unusual for male migrants either.19

17. Micro-credit programmes have been criticized for imposing high interest rates and the difficulties faced by many poor families in paying off the loans, as much as they have been applauded for generating an income for women (Schuler & Hashemi 1993; Kabeer 1998). Comla managed to succeed because she had accumulated some capital from her migration and her husband had a regular income. Their daily needs were met, and thus the loan could be paid off. Some of the other women in her village who had been partaking in the micro-credit programme were struggling. As Comla recalled, their economic situation was bad and they partly lived from the loan itself and hence had more trouble paying it off.

18. Another woman, Moream, lost all her savings of 60,000 s plus a 30,000 taka loan on a fee paid for her own migration to the Middle East. The trip never materialized. Nahar also lost 11,000 takas this way; she changed her mind in the process and decided she did not want to go.

19. Six other Bangladeshi women we knew in Malaysia had lost money (40,000-200,000 takas each) to an agent while trying to send a male relative abroad.
Some investments – such as those made by the three women to send their sons to bidesh – may be considered risky or misinformed. However, there are other reasons why some investments did not turn out to be entirely successful. At times, failure was simply a result of bad luck; more frequently, however, the women’s endeavours were hindered by sociocultural norms and values. In some cases, the community or male guardians did not approve of the women’s successful endeavours, leading to a sense of social isolation that affected the women socially, emotionally and economically. In other cases, the women’s ongoing and troubled relations with men who had more socio-economic power than they had influenced their decisions concerning income-generating activities. The stories of some of the women illustrate both aspects.

Hashida and Leyla were the exceptions in terms of the amount of money they had at their disposal upon their return, namely about 400,000 takas each. Both women received interest on the money they had put in the bank. Additionally, Leyla had bought land that she now cultivated and she also became a money-lender in the neighbourhood in Dhaka where she lived; this provided a considerable source of income. Leyla’s neighbours considered her a well-off woman, and rightfully so. However, neither she nor her neighbours considered her migration to have brought her success, accomplishment or social prestige. She was viewed negatively for ‘breaking her family’; three of her four children had gone off track while she was abroad. Around 2004, she started running a liquor shop (an illegal business) from her home in the slum she lived in. Although she did not seem to need the money, she evidently felt that the customers who came to her shop at night helped to relieve her social isolation. In 2005, she spent a few months in jail, as she had been caught carrying bottles of liquor in her neighbourhood. By 2006, she had resumed the liquor business at her house.

As for Hashida, she derived income from the house described in the previous section and had 200,000 takas in the bank. She explained that she preferred not to work any more; she let the money do the ‘work’ and lived on the interest. Yet, her life still was not peaceful. She had been back for a few years and her relatives continued putting pressure on her for money; her social isolation had increased. Eventually, she sold the house to her brother and moved in with her mother. Hashida told Nahar: ‘I thought that having money would bring an end to my problems. But it did not at all.’

In 2002, Hashida used all her money to buy a minibus for public transport. This seemed a little surprising, because it entailed a certain risk and seemed impulsive and unlike Hashida. After some months of operating, the bus was involved in a fatal accident and ended up a total loss. Hashida had lost all her money. She became ill. It seemed that she had given up on life. Her mother said later that Hashida had become ‘a little crazy’ towards the end of her life. On her deathbed, Hashida cried: ‘Send me a man, any man – I want to marry now!’ For all those years, Hashida had tried to make it on her own with the money she had earned, yet she had never gained the social respect she had desired in order to live her life peacefully. She died in her mid thirties feeling that if only she had had a husband, people would have treated her respectfully.
Shazeda had set up a little tea stall in her neighbourhood in Dhaka. Business initially went well, but since her husband was violent and took her earnings from her, it made little sense to continue this business. Later, in 2004, she too started a liquor shop, a somewhat surprising decision given the illicit character of this business and her pious and upright personality, for which she was obviously respected in the neighbourhood. She explained that she felt that she did not have a choice, as her husband was living with his third wife and was not contributing to her household; money was scarce. Additionally, she had to repay Leyla the 40,000 takas she had borrowed to pay an agent to go to bidesh again, a trip that never materialized. With the revenues from the liquor shop, she had paid off the loan by 2007. She continued the business.

Nahar (see boxes 9.4 and 9.5) was unmarried and lived with her younger brother in a house she had built in a village. As a source of income, she had started her own tailoring shop. An NGO that had given her training in pattern making allowed her to buy a sewing machine in instalments. Business initially went well. However, after a few months the middleman who provided the material started making advances; he wanted to marry her. Her guardian (the village schoolmaster) and the NGO had to interfere to stop his increasingly aggressive moves. The harassment stopped but she had to give up her business, and thus lost her income. The pressure on her to get married increased; finally, she agreed to marry a man her guardian had introduced her to.

Living in a sociocultural context in which not everyone respects women as equals with individual income-generating aspirations and capacities poses challenges to women who aspire to make their own living. The reasons for the failure of business ventures are frequently gendered. Because the women do not live up to sociocultural expectations, they are faced with social resistance and hurdles. Not uncommonly, relatives feel that they have a natural right to the earnings of ‘their’ women (see also Siddiqui 2001). Some women’s agency is actively limited by men who wield their social power over them; some women eventually succumb. Hashida died trying to gain acceptance.

However sad Hashida’s life may have been, her experiences did not signify failure. To her peers and to other women of various backgrounds in Bangladesh who heard her story, Hashida was a symbol, a courageous woman who against all odds had been determined to better her own life, and had not been discouraged by the sociocultural fabric or prepared to remain in the shadow of men. The fact that she had managed to earn a huge amount of money and make investments of her own choosing despite being pressured, was a great encouragement to others. Her life was regarded as an example, as a sign that things were changing, albeit slowly. Her situation at her death exemplifies the challenges ahead, yet her life speaks of hope. Her experiences and the successful income-generating experiences of several other women, however few, show that migrant women can benefit economically from migrating, all the while carving out the sociocultural space to do so, often with the help of supportive men in their lives.
Aiming to improve their children’s future

For five of the eleven women who had children, improving their children’s future had been the most important reason to migrate. The plans of three of the women did not materialize the way they had envisioned; one woman had achieved her goals, while the situation of the fifth woman was unclear.

One reason for earning money in bidesh was to save money for their daughter’s marriage. Two women managed to do so. Two others failed as their savings had been insufficient or had been lost through another failed initiative. Mothers had also wanted to invest in their children’s education. Educational achievements, however, generally did not proceed as envisioned. Most children had not felt compelled to continue their education the way their mothers had wanted and had dropped out of school (cf. Asis, Huang & Yeoh 2004:205). Most of the children were living in extended households. In two cases, it became clear that the daughters were expected to do a large part of the household chores in their mothers’ absence, and sometimes they were fed less than the other children of the household whose mothers were around. These girls had dropped out of school not because they did not like school or were ‘disobedient’, but because they could not cope with the school pressures plus the workload at home.

Interpersonal dynamics between those who had left and those who had stayed (e.g. between different wives or sisters-in-law) led to situations in which children, both boys and girls, were regularly confronted with derogatory talk about their mothers’ migrations. Some of the children were told that their mother had gone to bidesh to have sex with other men. This attitude made it increasingly difficult for children to cope with their mothers’ absence (cf. Parreñas 2005:335).

The mothers told us that some children had gone astray while their mothers were abroad. Leyla’s story is a case in point. As seen in the previous section, she had earned well in bidesh and had desired to brighten her children’s futures. She had left out of frustration with the economic performance and ‘simple-mindedness’ of her husband. She was business-minded and a firm believer in the power of education, and she wanted to improve the prospects of her four children. Each month she had sent additional money for tuition fees. However, when she returned she found that all four of them had dropped out of school long before her return. No-one had informed her; the remittances might have stopped had they told her. Both daughters had married men of their own choice. One son had become a ganja smoker and an alcoholic, while the other one had raped a young girl and was being sued by her family. By 2006, both sons had become drug addicts, and the second one was in prison. One daughter was happily married to an educated man; the other daughter was in a troubled marriage. Leyla’s investments had not paid off. She was personally blamed for the situation of her children.

Consumer goods, gifts and demands by others

Migrant workers all over the world spend a large proportion of their earnings on consumer goods and gifts. They are expected to bring back trophies of their econo-
mic success, namely luxury and consumer goods such as TVs, audio players, VCRs, fans, kitchen machines, gold jewellery and other gifts. The pressure to bring back these goods is particularly troublesome for those whose earnings are meagre. Yet the symbolic value of these goods is considerable: they symbolize people’s dreams of the affluent and ‘developed’ bidesh – images that are constructed by the media, movies and advertisements, and perpetuated by the stories of returned migrants. They are symbols of modernity and distinguish those who have migrated from those who have not (Gardner 1993:11). The consumer goods testify to a person’s success abroad, or alternatively, to a person’s failure and loss of face if he or she returns empty-handed.

Rahman (2000:6) calls these purchases by Bangladeshi migrants ‘honour goods’. The social pressure to bring back these ‘modern’ items cannot be underestimated (cf. Gamburd 2000:237). Migrants feel that their success is rated according to what they bring back, which in turn has a considerable impact on their social standing and prestige. These goods are bought with ‘easy money’, so the myth goes. While both male and female migrants take pleasure and pride in bringing back some of these goods, doing so often seriously depletes their resources.

Hardly anyone we knew had left Malaysia without the obligatory TV and VCR, regardless of whether or not there was electricity in their village. When asked, it was said that they were of better quality than the ones that are available in Bangladesh. Even if the quality was not better, the social value surely was (cf. Gardner 1993:12). While hard to estimate, the amount of money spent on consumer goods generally corresponded to several months’ pay. Additionally, as seen in the story of Nazma (see box 9.3), hundreds of ringgits were spent on taxes and excess baggage charges, and she was by no means an exception. Yet the migrants themselves perpetuate this pressure to bring large amounts of gifts and consumer goods through their actions.

Although most of the studies that refer to this phenomenon studied male migrants, it is no different for female migrants. Sukamdi (2001:120) found that for Indonesian returned migrant women, buying electrical goods had a higher priority than investing in capital goods. Perera (INSTRAW/IOM 2000:140) maintains that for Sri Lankan returned migrant women, the improvement of their quality of life brought about by the ownership of such items is felt to be ‘empowering’; it makes the housekeeping and cooking easier. She argues that although the money spent on these items is non-productive, it can have a positive impact on a woman’s social prestige. Although this is undoubtedly the case for some, for many it does not seem to lead to a significant advance in their position (cf. Brochman 1992; Eelens 1995; Gamburd 2000).

Nazma’s story highlights the high expectations that people have of receiving gifts. Some women brought little back, as they had not had much money left over. This was often felt to be shameful. For example, in order to appease her relatives, one woman told them that she had bought gold jewellery worth 60,000 takas, but that it had been stolen a few days before she had returned home – a story that she had fabricated. A few of the women we met had not brought back many items, as they simply had not seen the point. In retrospect, many of the women wished that they had saved some money instead of spending it all on presents and consumer goods.
Hashida was one of the women who had brought back few consumer items and gifts. When we left Hashida’s house in 2001, her friend Nahar said to us: ‘Hashida was smart. She did not bring many things back; she came back rich. I brought so many gifts and ended up paying so much tax. Now I am broke and yet no-one is helping me.’

An important function of the goods and gifts brought back is to fulfil social expectations and gain symbolic value in terms of enhancing the returnee’s prestige. While the gifts may reinforce the returnee’s relationship with the recipient and hence strengthen the former’s fallback position, it is not guaranteed to do so – as Nahar and many others found out. Although bringing back certain gifts and goods also gives the migrants pleasure (and the personal value of that cannot be ignored), most women and men had succumbed to the social pressure of bringing consumer goods to demonstrate their economic success (cf. Mazzucato et al 2006:1064).

For oneself: gold and savings

The most valuable items that the women brought back for themselves were pieces of gold jewellery, as Nazma’s aunt had pointed out. Gold is seen as an asset of long-term value. The amount of gold one brought back was a very private issue that was shared with only a few trusted family members, as seen in Nazma’s case. The amount spent on gold ranged from 10,000 to 60,000 takas, depending on the woman’s earnings and savings.20 It is important to note that this was an investment made for the woman’s own benefit. Gold is highly valued and desired by Bangladeshi women. Apart from its material value, it has a social and symbolic value, particularly but by no means exclusively when getting married. Many women seem to feel more ‘womanly’ by owning gold jewellery, and they derive a feeling of status and prestige from it. It enhances and confirms their femininity. While buying gold is often seen as being a way of investing money for times of crisis, for the Bangladeshi women gold is not primarily an asset to sell when needed. When asked, women will generally exclaim: ‘I will never sell my gold!’ Yet, some have to when their need becomes dire. Its economic value cannot be denied and it also strengthens women’s fallback positions. For those who intended to marry after their return, jewellery enhanced their ‘worth’, as highlighted by the words of Nazma’s aunt.

Box 9.3: Nazma’s homecoming – IV

Unpacking the gifts and goods brought back: a public event

The next morning – Nazma’s first full day back in the village – her elder sister arrived and the crowd of neighbours, relatives and children returned: Nazma would be unpacking and distributing gifts, the event everybody had anxiously been waiting for. Nazma felt uncomfortable

20. Nahar and Pori seemed to be two exceptions. Each had brought back gold worth approximately 80,000 takas.
and defiant. ‘There’s not much really,’ she said, but the onlookers ignored her comments. ‘Why should I have to give anything to those who never tried to help me?’ she angrily murmured to her aunt. Earlier, Nazma had sent saris for her sisters, material to make clothes for the children, a golden necklace for her mother and prayer mats for her brothers. She had then decided not to bring much more for them: there were so many of them and she really couldn’t afford it. Having been given such short notice of their return, there had not been enough time to save more money to buy gifts. She had bought 24 bars of soap and several hairpins to distribute.

While she unpacked the soap, her sister admired a silver-coloured teapot and tray that Nazma had just unpacked. ‘But Nazma,’ she said, ‘you don’t even have a showcase to display it in.’ Her aunt reacted quickly: ‘Nazma will soon have an armoire,’ she replied, putting the teapot back on the table. Two unfamiliar men were hanging around; they were looked at with suspicion. They were questioned, then sent away: nobody had seen them before and the number of thefts had increased in recent years, especially from households to which migrants had returned. The house of Hamid, whose son was in Singapore, had been robbed the previous month. Nazma had unpacked the valuable items after the blinds had been closed the night before. She had of course brought some electronic goods: a blender, a cassette deck and a rice boiler that she had purchased the previous year. These she would keep for herself. The rice boiler is a National and the tape player a Sony, she explained. They are quality brands, incomparable with the local Bangladeshi brands, she said. At the time there was no electricity in the village.

When it became evident that there was nothing else to display, the spectators began to drift off. Nazma’s eldest sister talked about her daughter, Ferdousi (Nazma’s niece), who had got married 18 months previously. She had recently delivered her first baby. Nazma smiled, thinking about her favourite niece. Her sister invited her to come over. Nazma’s face clouded and she declined the invitation. She later told us that she was too embarrassed and ashamed to see her niece and her husband, because she was still unmarried.

The night before, after the blinds had been closed, Nazma had shown her mother and aunt the gold jewellery she had brought back: three rings, a necklace and two bangles. They had cost her about 20,000 takas. Her aunt and her cousin sister had admired the jewellery. ‘This is the best thing that you brought back,’ her aunt had said. ‘You are very clever. You will need this for your marriage. Who will provide it otherwise? Your brothers won’t.’ Nazma had nodded, and for now she tried to avoid the ‘marriage’ topic. But she had also realized that with her brother leaving and the family having no resources, her marriage chances were bleak.

Some of the women had managed to keep a little money for themselves, usually somewhere between a couple of thousand and tens of thousands of takas, which they kept in the bank. For example, Nazma had 30,000 takas when she returned from bidesh. This was not talked about; when her interests differed from those of other household members, information was kept from them. Nazma knew that she would need some money to go back and forth to Dhaka to find employment, or perhaps to bribe her way into a job or to use for her marriage to Rashid. If the worst came to the worst, she would need it as a down payment to go to bidesh again.

It is common knowledge that Bangladeshi women try to save something for difficult times or unexpected events or demands. In the villages, for example, women
often take a handful of uncooked rice from a day’s supply and put it aside (personal communications). Also, many women who work in garment factories in Bangladesh are known to save part of their money in their bank accounts and fix it for ten years, or pay monthly into life insurance schemes (Amin 1998; Khundker 2001). Salma Helena and Sariswati used to work in the garment industry before migrating and had such accounts: instead of taking the money out when times were tough, they tried to continue paying into it and only withdrew money in times of severe crisis. Although the amounts were small, they had kept some money aside for life after their return from bidesh, but generally not enough to support them for long if not further supplemented.

Money that was lost or wasted

The earnings that are retrospectively considered lost or wasted are often conspicuously absent from studies on migration. As seen above, money was sometimes lost through failed investments. Yet there were other sources of loss, namely the money that a woman might allocate differently could she do it again. It is worth focusing on these expenditures for two reasons. First, considerable amounts of money were often involved. Second, these investments were closely related to larger social goals, and the losses were intrinsically gendered. Many of the women we met referred to a part of their earnings as being ‘lost’. These amounts were spent or lost while still in Malaysia or after coming back to Bangladesh. The reasons and sources differed.

First, while in Malaysia, three migrant women had each lost gold jewellery worth 30,000-40,000 takas by entrusting it to a friend to take back to their relatives (see table 9.5). The valuables were never delivered, since they had been ‘stolen’ on the way. These experiences were not isolated cases; we heard many similar stories while in Malaysia.

Second, six women referred to the way their remittances had been invested without their approval as wasted and lost. Just like Nazma’s situation with her brother, three married women had discovered upon their return that their husbands had not allocated the money as instructed. For example, Shazeda’s husband had a good income of his own and she had asked him to buy land and build some houses with her money. Instead he had spent it on alcohol. Members of the community confirmed this information. Other husbands who were confronted with accusations of

21. Here I refer only to actual earnings and remittances, not to the wages migrants would have been entitled to.

22. Another category of losses of a somewhat different nature was related to circumstances in Malaysia. As seen in Chapter 7, many migrants had spent as much as 30,000-65,000 takas for new visas and passports in order to secure employment when they faced or feared dismissal and being sent home. Whereas migrants were not forced to do so, they felt inclined to secure their stay and paid large amounts of money towards this end. Also, it was not uncommon for migrants to be robbed by gangs, or forced to bribe police officers who misused their power. These losses could be considered to be beyond their immediate control, given that they was determined to be able to stay longer in Malaysia.
misusing the money said in their defence that they had had to keep the household running and take care of the children. While this certainly holds some truth, it is common for migrant women to find that their wishes regarding the allocation of their earnings have not been honoured (Gamburd 2000; Siddiqui 2001). When the women had realized that their money was being misused, they often started sending it to a sister or mother instead. While this worked for several women, it was not always foolproof, as Nazma’s story shows. When we asked what the women would do differently if they were to go to bidesh again, many said that they would send money to a trusted person and also open a personal bank account. It should be noted that migrant men saw themselves confronted with similar problems (personal communications with migrant men).

Third, a significant amount of money was lost as a result of it being entrusted to fiancés or husbands while still in Malaysia, as seen in Chapter 8. The reasons for entrusting money to others varied from emergencies in someone’s family or investing in a business, to the need for a new visa or passport to stay on in bidesh. Of the women we met in Bangladesh, at least seven had provided or lent money to men while in Malaysia. As can be seen in table 9.5, the lost sums were often large (50,000-100,000 takas). The contributions made to these men were generally seen as an investment in their common future. If, for example, the money was for a fee to enable the man to stay in Malaysia, it was regarded as a way to ensure that the relationship would endure and that the man would not be married off to someone else upon his return to Bangladesh. The men usually promised to pay back the money. Sometimes, however, the money was used for entirely different purposes, such as to enable a man to migrate to another country. Some of the women who gave money to their potential husbands had explicitly told us that they disapprove of the dowry system, and had said that they did not want to get married with a dowry. Paradoxically, these investments often appeared similar to dowry payments: the women’s underlying reason for making them was often partly induced by wanting to strengthen their position vis-à-vis the men. In cases where the marriage took place and the relationship continued, these investments were soon forgotten and certainly not regarded as a loss: the women had gained through their marriage, which for them had been an important goal.

Unfortunately, all too often these relationships did not work out; the money was not returned and the investments became acute losses. This was the case for six of the seven women we met in Bangladesh who lost money (see table 1). One woman, Salma Helena, did end up marrying her fiancé, yet the money spent on a business idea of her husband remained lost. The cultural given in Bangladesh that a woman needs to pay for her marriage, namely her dowry, has been internalized to such an extent that some men found it easy to ask for money from women, who in turn were willing to lend them money. At the same time, some women had naively trusted men while chasing their dreams.

---

23. Nahar lost even more (200,000 takas). See her story in boxes 4 and 5.
Some women felt that they had been too trusting. Nahar is a case in point (see box 9.4). All in all, she had lost several hundred thousand takas. Her story exemplifies different ways of losing money, the various dynamics at stake and the sociocultural, gendered embeddedness of her decisions. How could women as smart and strong as Nahar or Nazma trust men who were not entirely committed to them? Some women were very young. Nahar was 19 at the time and had encountered quite a bit hardship. ‘These men are very skilled in sweet-talking and saying soft things,’ some women remarked, explaining the infatuations of their girlfriends and colleagues. Going back to Bangladesh alone – she did not have a real family to return to – frightened Nahar. She craved affection and a secure future, as did other women, and having a husband was an indispensable part of that dream. Relatives would pressure them to marry. While some women’s decisions appeared romantic or overly naive, they were partly responding to internalized social norms and rules concerning marriage.

**Box 9.4: Nahar’s story - I**

Nahar was 22 when she returned to Bangladesh after five years in Malaysia. She had earned exceptionally good money in Malaysia: not only had she worked for a ‘good’ company, but she was known to be the fastest sewer and had thus earned more than anybody else, thanks to the piece-work system. The desire to do something for her mother, whose health had deteriorated and who was badly treated by her husband, had motivated her to go to bidesh. Her mother had not wanted her to go: she was so young – only 17! Yet she left, determined to change their common fate. Initially she had transferred money to her mother’s bank account. She also had sent jewellery to her on two occasions. The second time, however, it was lost: a female friend had promised to deliver jewellery worth 25,000 takas to her home, but she never turned up. Then Nahar’s mother unexpectedly died. Nahar was devastated. Her mother had never wanted her to go. Her father, with whom she had a strained relationship, took over of his deceased wife’s bank account. Nahar never heard from him again. She had lost 200,000 takas to her father.

Months later, and still grieving, she noticed a young Bangladeshi man – Abdul – in the factory. She was very shy, yet she agreed to talk to him over the phone. She thought he was smart and aloof, yet friendly. They mainly talked over the phone. He said he wanted to marry her, and she was very happy. But, he first wanted to earn more money in a Western country, where wages were higher. Meanwhile, rumours were going round that he was seeing an Indonesian woman. Nahar confronted him, but he said it was all nonsense. She agreed to let him borrow money to go to Australia, and gave him 42,000 takas. It all went horribly wrong and within months Abdul was back in Malaysia, doing odd jobs. He then wanted to go to Italy instead. The fee was even higher. Again Nahar paid for him. It was an awful lot of money, as Nahar said. She had sworn never to tell anybody how much, not even her aunt who had asked her many times. After five years, Nahar decided it was time to go home. She had worked in garment factories in Dhaka since she was 13 and was tired. In Bangladesh she went to live with her aunt in Dhaka, who was relatively well off. There was no-one else to turn to now that her mother had died and her father had broken with the family. Her younger sister had married while she was away and her brother was roaming around. Her aunt had been writing her letters, and she was happy to go there.
In the beginning it was nice. Her aunt helped her to buy a plot of land outside Dhaka. On a visit there, however, she found that her aunt had been dishonest: she had charged her a lot more than what the land was worth. Slowly, things went sour. Nahar decided she had to leave her aunt’s house. But where could she stay? Abdul had not told her when he would return. She had called him twice. He only told her to make sure she did not get married to anyone else. She talked to his room-mate, who told her that Abdul was now with a Nepali woman. Nahar feared the worst. Impulsively, she decided it would be best to go to bidesh again. She contacted an agent who would send her to Saudi Arabia and paid 11,000 takas in advance. But she felt weary; she did not want to leave again. After all, she was glad to be home. She decided to stay in the village where she had bought the plot of land. That was rather uncommon, as she had no relatives there, but she wanted to get away from Dhaka; it was too busy for her taste. While in the village with her aunt, she had met a schoolmaster, who had been friendly and well respected in the village. She went to him, told him all about her situation and asked him for his protection and guardianship. She had impressed him, and he was sympathetic to this pious woman who was covered head to toe in a black burka. He agreed to help her build a house on her plot of land and offered her protection. The house was built with an adjacent room that was rented out for a few hundred takas a month. By the time she moved in, however, she had run out of money. The house had cost her a tremendous amount. Some had said that she had been ‘stupid’, that the costs could easily have been 40,000-50,000 takas less than what she had paid the schoolmaster. But what could she have done, she thought? Without the help of the schoolmaster she would surely not have been able to build a house there and, more importantly, have a guardian in the village. How could she have possibly lived there? Everybody in the village knew that she was under the protection of the schoolmaster, so they were good to her and left her alone. Nahar was very content to have her own house and felt safe and happy in the village. There was still no news from Abdul – and there never would be, she realized. Nahar’s 14-year-old brother moved in with her. She earned some money by renting out the other room, but it was far from enough to live on. Although she had not wanted to, Nahar returned to work in a garment factory.

9.5 Fulfilling women’s social migration aspirations

As seen in Chapter 5, issues related to the institution of marriage and related notions of appropriate roles and behaviour for women played a predominant role in the women’s migration decisions in one way or another. The three different scenarios are discussed in the following sections, namely women who aspired to marry, women who wanted to avoid marriage and women who had escaped, at least temporarily, from their marital struggles.

Women who aspired to marry

Of the 29 returnees we had met in Malaysia, 18 desired or had desired to get married. Twelve of them married, while six did not (see table 9.5). Of the 12 who fulfilled their wish, 8 appeared to be in stable relationships and were genuinely content over-
all, while one was miserable and three were in situations that were not settled when we last met them. This last group of women were rather anxious. All but three of the women had married men they had known in Malaysia. In the case of the women who married men who had not been abroad, their guardians had taken a proactive role in their marriage arrangements. However, the women had had an important say in choosing their husbands.

As table 9.5 shows, four of the six single women who eventually married had been single before migrating. Two women’s desire to marry was not fulfilled during the time of the study. Five of the seven divorced women who had wanted to remarry did so. Three of them appeared content and in stable relationships; their in-laws had accepted them. One marriage appeared to be rather unstable: the bride had not yet been introduced to her in-laws and was anxious. When we met her again in 2004, she had just moved to her husband’s village. By 2006, she and her husband had two daughters and were still together. As for the third woman, we were not able to get a full impression as she had only just returned from Malaysia.

Three of the ten married women had divorced and had remarried or were intending to do so. One had divorced her abusive husband and married a man of her own choice in Malaysia. Upon their return to Bangladesh, he moved in with her and her family; the relatives who had opposed the situation at first had finally accepted it. The couple felt content. Another woman had divorced and now lived with her new husband but was rather unhappy: she was a second wife and the situation was tense. The third woman did not get to marry the man of her choice upon her return, as her children were against it.

Of the three widowed women, two wanted to remarry. One had got married in Malaysia several years before returning, but when she returned to Bangladesh, the husband denied being married to her. The other woman had also got married in Malaysia. Her husband was still abroad when we spoke to her, and it was unclear what would happen upon his return. She, too, was rather anxious.

Although we met most of these women on many different occasions, we were not able to follow up on all of them as frequently and over as extended of a period of time as was the case with others. The data therefore reflect the situation only at certain points in time. As seen in the case of Nahar, if one evaluates her situation in 2001, one might be inclined to assess her situation as dire and her goals as largely unfulfilled. However, by 2004 and 2006, her situation was rather different; the changes that came about are to an important degree still related to her migration (see box 9.5). Thus, as 12 women out of 18 had married someone they had wanted to marry, a relatively high percentage (67%) had managed to fulfil their goals.

Some studies on both male and female Bangladeshi migrants found that dowries in households that had a family member working overseas were higher (Gardner 1994; Siddiqui 2001). Our study came to similar conclusions for cases in which dowries were paid. Because of the presumed financial status attached to returned migrants perhaps in combination with the alleged loss of social status, dowry demands were higher for returned migrant women. A mother-in-law of a returned migrant woman we met in one village stated: ‘A returned migrant woman is never unmarried for long.’ Her son was married to a returned migrant woman of a lower
status. Part of the dowry of 100,000 takas was used to pay the migration fee to send the son (the newly wedded husband) to Saudi Arabia. It was ‘sort of a business’, the mother-in-law explained. As seen in Chapter 8, many women had feared that dowry demands would be exorbitant upon their return for these very reasons; their worries had not been unfounded. This is one reason why many chose to find a husband on their own.

‘Available’ women who were known to have come back economically successful were not short of suitors. Many proposals were made but the dowry demands were high – and at times outrageously so, as Nahar and Layla both recalled, with men asking for motorcycles and large amounts of money.

Layla had never wanted to marry or meet a man in Malaysia: upon her return, she would marry a man chosen by her and her family. Suitors were in ample supply, yet the dowries demanded were unaffordable. For more than a year, the issue caused much tension in Layla’s family. She eventually married one of her earliest suitors; her first choice. Her in-law’s had not agreed initially, because the dowry offered was considered to be too low. The potential groom’s family was better off than Layla’s family. There were two spacious brick houses in the man’s family compound and they owned four shops. Layla’s brief work experience before she had left for bidesh to work in a garment factory was disapproved of (only the main negotiators knew that she had been in bidesh). Moreover, she could not read the Koran, which reflected her ‘poor education’. However, Layla was determined to marry this particular man. In Malaysia, her friend Batashi, a trained teacher, had encouraged Layla to practise her reading and writing skills. Despite her limited education, Layla spoke better English than any of the other women. With the help of Batashi, she had improved her reading and writing skills, which had given a boost to her self-esteem. In the midst of the marriage negotiations, she persevered and taught herself to read the Koran. Meanwhile, her sister – who was still working in Malaysia – topped up the dowry funds a little.

Finally, after a year, a settlement was reached and they could marry. The groom liked Layla and the mother-in-law was impressed with Layla’s achievements and perseverance. Besides, Layla was considered beautiful, as she was fair skinned and being ‘fair’ is often equated with being ‘good’ (Rozario 2002:43). It appeared that her determination and trust in herself – skills that she had further developed in Malaysia – had played a crucial role in the marriage negotiations. As for the mother-in-law, who was the pivotal person in terms of the decision making regarding her son’s marriage, she was not entirely altruistic and simply giving in. The other potential marriage candidate was a cousin sister. The mother-in-law explained to me that it would be more difficult to rule over her. Since they are relatives, the woman could complain to her family and then there would be problems. She would not have this problem with Layla, who was not a relative and was from a lower status family. This is not uncommon reasoning. However, having said that, although my impressions are limited to a few visits, Layla seemed truly happy; she was glowing and felt lucky to be with her husband.

Money that had been saved while abroad could help to pay for a better dowry. In some instances, it also guaranteed a certain level of social and financial independen-
ce to pursue a ‘love’ marriage (cf. Gamburd 2000:239). In the cases where women had chosen their own grooms, the families of both the women and the men often did not approve of ‘love’ marriages. Although some families interfered and stopped the marriage from taking place, others eventually consented.

Farhana’s story is exemplifying. She had met Faruk in Malaysia. The whole community could see that this was a relationship based on ‘true love’. Despite her young age, Farhana had been appointed as a leader in her factory. She spoke English and was well respected among the women for her kindness and wise advice. Farhana came from a simple background and had been sent to bidesh to pay off her parents’ debts, while Faruk was from a middle-class background. Due to illness, Farhana left Malaysia earlier than planned. Faruk had bought the obligatory TV for her to take back for her relatives, as she had no money left because of the high medical bills. They stayed in touch. Faruk came to marry her when he returned to Bangladesh a year and a half later. In the meantime, she had continued her studies and passed her SSC exam, a prerequisite for her to be accepted by Faruk’s family. She had managed to convince her father not to promise her to anyone else yet. Farhana was brought to her in-law’s family and was soon accepted. Faruk had been politically active before he went to bidesh, and his family had feared that his life was at risk. The woman who had ‘changed’ him was welcomed by the family. For both of them, the migration experience had ended well, despite all the hardships and the fact that Farhana had not been able to send much money back.

Others, such as Hameeda, were less fortunate. Hameeda’s friend Rashid was going to marry her. This was one of the very few other couples who had a relationship that everybody in Malaysia, friend or foe, agreed would last. He was a ‘good’ man; he loved her and they were both very pious. However, the marriage did not materialize. Rashid and a few of his relatives visited Hameeda’s family after her return. His relatives did not approve: her family’s social standing was too low, as were her educational level and the dowry. Rashid’s family did not seem to take into account that Hameeda had paid more than 50,000 takas to help Rashid obtain a new passport when he had found himself in trouble. Rashid did not return to her village and the marriage was called off. Some of her relatives blamed her and rumours about her were circulated in the community. Two years later, she had to search for a job in Dhaka. The migration experience for her had not ended well.

There are no clear-cut answers to the question why it worked out for some and not for others. In the case of Hameeda, the fact that she had been married before, however briefly, is likely to have played a major role. Relatives usually make inquiries in the community, and negative accounts, whether or not factual, have an influence. Husbands-to-be were under a lot of sociocultural pressure as well. Some could persevere more easily than others. The women who had been married before often saw their marriage aspirations unfulfilled, either because the potential husband did not keep his promise or his relatives did not approve of the marriage. The social ideal of a ‘pure’ woman is strong in Bangladesh and often goes hand in hand with disapproval and less respectful behaviour towards women who have been married before.

Although sociocultural norms and the unequal position of women played a notable role, they are not the only reasons why the desired marriages did not take place.
For some of the women, the relationship had never seemed viable in the eyes of those witnessing it – colleagues as well as us. Some women lost money and the relationships were strained; the intentions of the men appeared questionable. It is beyond the scope of this study to venture into the field of psychology. Yet, some women seemed drawn to men and situations with familiar patterns of abuse. For example, the type of man Nahar described as her ‘ideal husband’ is 5-6 years older than her, so he would command respect, and he is not only smart but also moody and angry, so that in a quarrel he would win and things would be settled. These criteria largely reflected the qualities of her father, who had mistreated her mother – which had been the main reason for her migration. The label also fit Abdul, who had cheated her out of more than 200,000 takas. Nahar, as seen from her story, eventually broke the pattern. She carved out a way to remain single, to take care of herself; only then did she agree to get married to someone of her own liking. Not everyone, however, was able to break the pattern. More research into this issue is needed.

In short, many attached a substantial value to marriage, as it was regarded as an important prerequisite for a stable and happy future. Salma Helena’s words are exemplifying. She had lost 100,000 takas to her fiancé, who had failed to set up a business with the money. Her family had been doubtful about the marriage and resented the fact that she had sent less money back during the last years of her migration. Salma Helena was a little worried about their financial situation and the money lost. Yet she said with a big smile: ‘Sure, I don’t have any money, but I have a husband! Isn’t that true?’ To her, her migration had succeeded: she was happily married.

Box 9.5: Nahar’s story - II

Nahar, who had worked in a garment factory before, had taken on a garment job once more; her savings had run out. She got up at 4.30 a.m. to cook for herself and her brother. By 7.00 she was on a bus heading to the factory. There was compulsory overtime work everyday until 10 p.m. Nahar usually returned home around 11 p.m. After bathing, doing her laundry, then cooking and eating it was usually 1 a.m. before she got to bed. The next morning she was up again at 4.30. She was off work on Sundays, but occasionally had to do overtime on Sundays too. She earned 2000-2400 takas a month, just enough for her and her brother to get by on.

We visited Nahar on Sunday afternoons. Over the span of a few months, we could see Nahar’s health deteriorate (cf. Karim & Khan 1995; Khundker 2001). She was exhausted, had gastritis and was increasingly anxious; this was not the future she had envisioned for herself. Nahar had wanted to be a tailor and work from home, but she could not make patterns. With the help of a small NGO, the opportunity arose to take part in a course to learn this trade. At the end of the course, she would receive a sewing machine and would be provided with cloth and assistance to start her own tailoring business. Nahar jumped at the opportunity.

24. As a researcher it was difficult at times not being able to assist. It was not my role to interfere, not that I had the means or power to do so. However, Farhana and I decided to help two of the women to achieve their goals. We found the NGO and got them in touch with one another. The outcome as described in this box also reminded us of the complexity of the situation.
To begin with, the business went well. However, after a few months the middleman who provided her with materials started making advances. He wanted to marry her and his approach became increasingly aggressive. Her guardian (the village schoolmaster) and the NGO had to interfere. Consequently, she had to quit her business. The pressure on Nahar to marry increased after this incident. So far, Nahar had refused to marry. Requests came but often included large dowries and were from men she had no interest in marrying. Eventually, when she could no longer refuse, the schoolmaster introduced her to a young man who met her approval. While the marriage negotiations were in process, Nahar told him all her stories; she wanted him to know about her and her life before their marriage so that there would be no surprises. They got married. By 2004 Nahar had a two-year-old son and was visibly happily married to a bus driver, a quiet man who was respectful of her. By 2006, Nahar had resumed part-time tailoring from home and made an extra 1000 takas a month. Their marital relation was stable. When the marriage negotiations had been taking place, the schoolmaster had said, ‘Nahar has everything she needs, she doesn’t need anything any more’ – hinting at the land and the house Nahar had. The husband came from a different village and moved in with her. This had made her position stronger. Yes, there were little fights, she recalled. For example, one time he wanted to watch cricket on TV while she wanted to see a Hindi movie. She had strong feelings for this man, much to her own surprise, she said laughing. Nahar was obviously content with the way things had turned out.

Women who did not want to remarry

As seen in Chapter 5, several women wanted to migrate to escape the social pressure to marry. For those women who were unmarried or divorced and considered to still be of marriageable age, marriage was seen as inevitable – and they knew it. Going to Malaysia was often a way to temporarily postpone marriage. Some of the women who knew they could not avoid marriage sought partners of their own choice; others continued wishing that they could remain single.

Batashi, a former schoolteacher, had left for Malaysia because she had been severely abused by her husband in the few months that she was married to him. She had enjoyed her stay abroad; it had taken her mind off her pain and had given her a sense of self-determination. Moreover, since her family was well off she did not need to worry about sending money back. She returned to Bangladesh prematurely at the request of her father, following the negative publicity about women who worked in Malaysia. Back in Bangladesh, she enrolled in computer training; she would have liked to pursue work in this field. However, her father and her two brothers, both of whom lived and worked in Europe, were concerned about the family’s prestige and wanted her to marry. When we visited Batashi in her village, she said: ‘I never wanted to marry again in my life. But when I saw my father’s face and they were pushing me, I agreed. Apart from that reason, I hate men.’ By then, she had quit her course, got married and was five months’ pregnant. Nevertheless, while she did not see her desire to remain unmarried fulfilled, she felt her migration had had a positive impact on her life. The ‘time out’ it had given her had healed some of her
wounds and she held fond memories of her life in Malaysia. Moreover, although Batashi ultimately seemed to have lost out to the pressure her male family members based on prevalent gender roles and notions of prestige, her determination had not been in vain.

Batashi set preconditions for the marriage-to-be and hence was able to carve out a more secure and satisfying future. She did not want to be vulnerable again to abuse, as she had been in the in-laws’ house during her first marriage. Her father said that she could remain in the household; the groom would have to move in with them, living with her parents instead of her having to go to his family. Her father built a house for the couple and the husband moved in – the dowry had been substantial. Although Batashi did not seem to be happy in her marriage, she felt secure and content to be in her family’s home. The migration experience and her determination to go in the first place, notwithstanding her brothers’ opposition, had improved her sense of self as well as her negotiating power: her relatives now know that she does what she says she will do. Batashi also stood up to her husband and he listened to her. Of course, the fact that the economic situation of the family was good played a role, as did the love the father has for his daughter: when talking about his daughter, it transpired that he was pained by her suffering and wanted to accommodate her as much as he felt he could. His sons pressured him to have her married.

Four of the divorced or widowed returnees did not get married again and did not want to. Hashida was one of these women. However, she came to realize that her decision had made her life a lot more difficult, as seen earlier. While sometimes still pressured by relatives, these women were no longer considered to be marriageable, given their age, physique and children. Moreover, their families lacked the money for a dowry.

**Marital struggles**

Another reason for migration, as seen in Chapter 5, was to escape unhappy marital relationships. Of the ten women we met in Bangladesh who had been married before migration, four had left because they were frustrated with the economic performance of their husbands. Four others had left because of marital struggles or abuse. Of the four women who had left out of frustration with their husband’s economic performance and had been determined to better their economic situation, three were successful. Two of them also saw their marriages improve.

Comla had bought land in her own name and invested in a milk cow (see her story in the section on investments). While she felt that her migration was a failure due to its adverse effect on her children, her relationship with her husband had improved since her return. Women are largely defined through their family roles as wives and mothers. Many men feel a loss of self-respect and dignity when their wives take over as the breadwinner (cf. Gamburd 2000:193), and many may harbour a certain level

---

25. These were in line with her perceptions on her life in Malaysia when we talked to her while she was still living there.
of shame or emasculation. While Comla’s husband had been strongly opposed to his wife’s migration, even to the point of trying to stop her by calling the police, he had finally come around. He appreciated his wife’s business skills and respected her. Together they made her investment in the milk cow work. Her husband went to the market every day to sell the milk, and Comla had put a vested effort into the partnership. Both had become milder and more appreciative of one another. They also did not fight any more the way they used to, she said.

An improvement in marital relations did not always occur. Leyla – who, as described earlier, was very successful abroad and had bought land and became a money-lender after her return – continued to have an increasingly troubled relationship with her husband. She had wanted to marry someone else, but her children prevented her from doing so. Meanwhile, the couple continued to live in the same house in the slum, both bitter, both talking abusively about one another, yet not divorcing. Despite the conflict, Leyla felt she needed a husband, and her husband, despite feeling bitter, appreciated her money.

The fourth woman who had left out of economic frustration with her husband as well as abuse, Ferdousi, divorced him while in Malaysia (see also section 5.5: married women, and section 8.5).

Her ex-husband, who had also come to Malaysia, had stopped chasing and harassing her when she remarried. Upon their return to Bangladesh, the newly-weds moved in with her parents; everyone appeared to have accepted the new situation.

Generally speaking, we found that the four women who had left out of economic frustration and with a determination to change their economic situation, had been more successful in fulfilling their goals than the four women who had left due to heartache or abusive marriages. Of the four women who had migrated to get away from marital conflict and abuse, only one had saved and then invested some of her money in land and found more peace. Fahima, for example, like Ferdousi, had divorced her husband and married again. Her new situation was not satisfying, however, as she was a second wife, was not well treated by the extended family and was looked down upon in the village. She had returned from Malaysia with little money. She was anxious about her situation and her future seemed unclear. Her husband, who was also visibly weighed down by the domestic struggles, told us that he planned to go to bidesh again. He was trying to temporarily escape from the situation.

For the other two women who had migrated because of marital abuse and frustration (Shazeda and Parul), little had changed; if anything the situation had worsened. Both women had remitted money to their husbands and shared most of what they had brought back with them.

Apart from the confining socio-economic structures, which made it difficult for women to separate from their husbands and live dignified and protected lives, emotional attachment sometimes played a role in the perpetuation of marital struggles. Shazeda’s story is one example. She is the first wife to Hashid and had gone to Malaysia as she could no longer bear the emotional pain and abuse inflicted by her
husband. She went with Laizu, Hashid’s second wife; they both opted out.26 Shazeda returned after two years when news came to her of her daughter having conceived a baby boy. When she came back, her husband had been kind to her, and she thought that their marriage had been rekindled. It had improved only temporarily, however. While Shazeda and the second wife were in Malaysia, Rashid had married a third wife.

Several other women we met had found that their husbands had married new wives in their absence. Other studies in Asia have had similar findings (cf. Gamburd 2000; Zontini 2004:1134). Shazeda’s husband was thus no exception. After the money Shazeda had brought back had been spent, she recalled, things returned to how they had been before her departure. Rashid moved back to the third wife and only sporadically supported Shazeda and her three children. Shazeda was depressed about the situation and regretted that she had sent her money to her husband. She explained that divorce was not an option, as she would have even ‘bigger social problems’. She needed a man to provide protection and prestige. Shazeda: ‘All men know how little a woman can do. They know what she can do, and they know that a woman needs a man.’

We had first met Shazeda in her little shack in 1999.27 Overall, her situation in 2006 was not much different from what it had been when we first met her. Her husband mostly lived separately and Shazeda suffered from it; occasionally he was violent. Apart from the economic tightness of her situation and physical abuse, Shazeda often hinted at the pain that her husband’s emotional and physical neglect inflicted on her. She continued to long for her husband’s acknowledgement and affection. His rejection hurt her deeply. Her emotional attachment to her husband appeared to be as much of a reason for continuing her marriage as the sociocultural need to have a husband, which she claimed to be the reason for still welcoming her husband in her house.

Over the years, Shazeda had often contemplated or planned another migration. When things were particularly bad – after her husband had been over and had beaten her and her daughter – then talk and activities concerning migration intensified. For years, she had kept her bag packed at all times, ready for a sudden departure to bidesh. The agent had been paid 90,000 takas. Migration remained an idea, a way to opt out, however elusive. Her departure was postponed, not only because the agent had no visa, but also because in her heart, as we sensed, she did not really want to leave.

26. See also section 5.5: married women, for an account on her decision making to migrate.
27. The dynamics were very different from those in the countryside, where I would always attract a lot of attention. People here got used to my presence very quickly. When we went to Moream’s house, we would often sit on the floor in a corner while everything continued just the way it had: cooking, chatting with neighbours, discussing the latest developments with the recruitment agent, fights, you name it – it all went on. Often, this did not lead to answers to particular questions I might have had in mind that day. However, it created an amazing wealth of insights into the situation and migration dynamics of these returned and aspiring migrant women.
When Shazeda gave up the idea of going to bidesh, the third wife of her husband showed interest in the visa. Laizu, the second wife, had just returned from Malaysia and was receiving all of the husband’s attention—and would do so for as long as the money lasted, as Shazeda knew from experience. The third wife wanted to go to bidesh and make her own money; she had also been beaten and said she was fed up. Things were secretly arranged. The day after she should have left, we visited Shazeda. The third wife had not left for the airport. The husband had found out about her plans, beaten her up and locked her in the house. That was the end of all migration plans. While the husband had at first welcomed the economic benefits of his wives’ migrations, he had changed his mind. All this bidesh stuff led to disobedient wives and gave him a headache. The money for the fee was lost.

Shazeda continued making a living from her liquor store, as explained earlier. Sometimes much of the earnings were ‘wasted’ by the husband, who came and drank the alcohol without paying for it. Marital struggles continued. Yet, with her income and that of her daughter and son-in-law, they managed well financially.

In short, some returnees had carved out new or more harmonious marriages for themselves. This applies especially to those who had wanted to become more economically independent: their determination had steered them towards decisions that had resulted in profitable investments. Others remained unhappy in their marriages. Through the grapevine among the returned women, we regularly heard stories about women who remained dissatisfied with their marital relationships and, like Shazeda, contemplated migrating again (see also Siddiqui 2001:84). In several cases, their husbands had remarried during their absence, which had led to a new set of challenges upon their return. While sociocultural norms made separation difficult, emotional attachment sometimes also played a role.

Migrant mothers and their children

Being away had undoubtedly been the hardest on the women who were mothers. These women often started to cry when talking about their children; they missed them and knew that they too were missed and needed. In some cases, migrating had first involved marrying off their teenage daughters (Siddiqui 2001:88). Two women we met had married off their 11- or 12-year-old daughters before they had left for Malaysia; the aim was to protect them from abuse. Razia, who had migrated because her family was in dire economic need, said: ‘She was very young, but what could I do? This is a slum area. She would not be safe without her mother around.’

As seen earlier, children did not always gain from their mother’s migrations to the extent the mothers had hoped: there were lower wages, and the social structures and children’s treatment by relatives, as well as their own decisions, sometimes led to different outcomes than the mothers had envisioned.

Three women were unhappy that their daughters had married while they were abroad. Guardian’s motivations were inclined by reasons of honour and age. Comla had been married at a young age and had had to stop going to school. She had been determined to circumvent this plight for her two daughters. However, while she was away, her in-laws thought differently and arranged a marriage for her 15-year-old
daughter, while her 12-year-old daughter dropped out of school. Despite her earnings and the improved relationship with her husband after her return, Comla called her migration experience a failure because of the effects it had had on the lives of her daughters and their futures. She had wanted the fate of her daughters to be different. It broke her heart to see history repeat itself.

In several cases, fathers or other relatives lovingly raised the children, with no major problems occurring. Some saw their wives’ migration as a temporary change and not as a threat to their manhood (Cf. Resurreccion & van Khanh 2007:221). As other studies have also shown, on the whole families are capable of coping with temporary separation. Children’s longing and resentment, however, do not necessarily disappear (Cf. Asis 2001; Parreñas 2001).

Many mothers felt troubled and guilty regarding the detrimental emotional or social effects their migration had had on their children.28 This feeling was further fuelled by accusations from within the family and the wider community. As Asis, Huang and Yeoh (2004:201) point out, while women have pushed forward the frontiers of the productive sphere through their participation as wage earning migrant workers, little has been achieved in moving borders of gendered norms with respect to women’s roles and identities in the reproductive sphere. Whether children had gone astray or were perceived to have been spoiled, the community always seemed to blame the ‘deviant’ behaviour of the mother; it was their fault. While mothers had taken on a breadwinner’s role, this was often not compensated for by the fathers taking on their parental role competently (cf. Parreñas 2005:330). Fathers or other relatives were not held responsible, nor were the aunts and uncles or grandparents who had received remittances for their care accused of being slack. Some other studies on female migration from Indonesia and Thailand have come to different conclusions: relatives were held responsible if they had not fulfilled their duties (IN- STRAW 2000; Chantavanich 2001).29 In Bangladesh the fact that children may have suffered is often used to underline the moral conviction that women ought not to migrate; they should stay at home and conform to appropriate gender behaviour. Those mothers who went were considered ‘selfish’.

As mentioned earlier, Leyla was blamed for her children going astray. In their neighbourhood of Dhaka, however, a very large number of young teenagers drop out of school, and there are many young love-marriages and addicts. While Leyla’s children undoubtedly missed their mother, it is not certain that their lives would have taken another course had she not left. Siddiqui (2001:74) also notes that children’s perceived educational failings are too easily blamed on the women’s absence.30 Additionally, the fact that the mothers suffer a lot from being away from their children

---

28. Women are often not aware of the exact situation at home while they are abroad. Unless the children wrote about it themselves, many did not know. Relatives did not want to upset them or wanted them to stay on, as the remittances were needed or desired.

29. It should be noted that apart from other cultural differences, in those countries female employment in general was more common and socially accepted, as was female migration in particular.

30. She also found that the rate at which the migrant women’s children dropped out of school was actually lower than the national average.
and that many migrated in order to better their children’s future, is often ignored. By reacting adversely to women’s migration, relatives and communities further complicate and aggravate the situation of the children who are left behind, particularly if their suffering is used to further stigmatize their migrant mothers.

On a brighter note, some of the women who had teenagers told them about their experiences and shared with them the knowledge they had gained while abroad. The women who had children after they returned from Malaysia often talked extensively about how they envisioned educating their daughters. They regarded education as a prerequisite for a brighter future. Further research should investigate the potential positive impact of migration on children in Bangladesh.

9.6 Women’s position in and versus the community

As seen in earlier chapters, perceptions on women’s migration, gossip and stigmatization were often feared and could have a significant impact on a woman’s well-being. Gossip is part and parcel of community life, and women are often talked about. About half the women we met did not seem to be bothered by it; they were satisfied and felt safe with the lives they had and were not affected by people’s malicious criticism. Much of the criticism was relatively harmless and, according to some women, it was based on jealousy; many simply ignored it. As one woman remarked, neighbours usually did not mention her bidesh experience except during arguments, when it might be used against her: ‘She’s been in bidesh. Who knows what she did there!’ Yet, over the years the bidesh stories seemed to fade. By 2006, when we were looking for Shannaz in her parent’s village, people we asked for directions had forgotten that she had been in bidesh.

Nevertheless, more than a third of the women suffered from stigmatization and the effects of gossip, which were sometimes accompanied by threats from people in their communities. Malicious criticism was severe for those migrant women who had failed to fulfil their economic goals and/or who did not have a male guardian – a husband. Some women, like Nahar (see box 9.4 and 9.5), had been able to minimize harmful gossip and possible threats to their safety. Nahar had invested socially and economically in a well-respected guardian while simultaneously expressing her piouosity, that is, by demonstrating her flawlessness as a ‘good’ woman by wearing a burka at all times when outside her home. As White (1994) observed, covering oneself up is not necessarily a sign of subordination or obedience, as it is often ascribed to be by Western scholars. Apart from religious conviction, it can be a means to improve one’s room to manoeuvre, to move by oneself without being watched or gossiped about, to be safe and respected.

Many others’ faced more severe situations. As Kabeer (2000) points out, in Bangladesh the protection of a man is perhaps even more important than his provision.

31. This is in line with accounts of many female garment workers (Amin 1998; Dannecker 1998; Kabeer 2000; Khundker 2001).
Women who had been to bidesh and were living without a husband after their return were regarded as a threat to the social order of their communities. The lives they had carved out for themselves, whether or not successfully so, were often perceived by the community as an affront to traditional gender roles. Many women were verbally abused for not having a husband and having ‘failed’, as in the case of Nazma (see box 9.1-9.3). Some unmarried women were pressured through social stigma as well as the desire to earn an income, and left their villages in search of jobs in Dhaka, feeling that they did not ‘fit in’. A concomitant criticism by community members was the fact that women must have lived adulterous or promiscuous lives abroad. Others, as seen earlier, were harshly blamed for having ruined their children’s lives. Depending on the severity of the community’s perceptions and gossip, many women felt socially isolated.

The way some community members approached the women who had been in bidesh was less related to the women’s migration than to the way women on their own are treated by society at large. The fact that a woman had been in bidesh, and all the connotations that came with it, was simply used as an excuse for that woman’s behaviour. Shazida’s story is a case in point.

Upon her return from Malaysia, Shazida, a divorced woman, bought a plot of land with the help of her siblings and built a house just outside Dhaka. Her sister lived in the same community. Before her migration, she and her children had lived with her relatives, moving from one sibling’s house to another. Shazida was proud that she now has her own house. She rented two rooms out, raised some poultry and engaged in sewing to make a living. However, some men in the community had sought her out. One man, who was known as having a criminal record, passed by regularly telling her that since she had been abroad she must have been a prostitute and pushing her to bestow her favours on him. During our visits to Shazida over the years, we could see that she felt unsafe. This man often insulted her and he became increasingly aggressive. When he also started to ask for her teenage daughter, she went with her son to her ex-husband’s village to ask for his protection for their children – with no results. During our visit in 2004, she said that she had thought a lot about her marriage and that she had made a mistake by divorcing her husband years earlier. She had divorced her husband after he had married a second wife. Her life was too difficult without a husband, she said. She had wanted her ex-husband to come with her and show the community that she had a husband. She did not want to be single, alone and unprotected. She had also hoped he would marry off their daughter safely. She wished that she had a husband, then all would go smoothly and she would be treated respectfully.

Since Shazida’s siblings could not guarantee her safety, they urged her to move away from the community. Eventually she sold her house and land at a price far lower than its value: her harasser had allegedly pressured the potential buyers. With the help of her siblings, she bought a plot of land in another community and built a house, albeit a smaller and more basic one than the first house. By 2006, Shazida had rebuilt her life. Her daughter was working in a garment factory; her son was also employed there, although irregularly. Shazida was known in the community as a goat herder; most people did not know about her trip to bidesh. She did not feel
completely accepted by the community, but was confident that in a few years she would be. It was clear to us that she had built friendly relationships with the women in the community and felt much safer than she had before. Despite her problems, she felt she had gained from her migration:

If I had not gone to Malaysia, I would not be here under this roof. Along with my son and daughter, I would have to spend my life moving from one place to another, being pushed from my brother’s to my sister’s to another sister’s house. In Malaysia, I learnt so many things. And now I have a house. Having a house gives you power. When you have a house, you are independent.

While not having a husband had made things more complicated for her and had led her to leave her first house due to harassment, this scenario could also have happened had she not been to bidesh. However, she would not have been able to live there in her own house had she not gone to Malaysia to earn more money. In that sense, harassment is also a response to the relative empowerment of women who take care of themselves. The fact that she was a woman living by herself – not ‘belonging’ to anyone and not being ‘kept under control’ by a man, as traditional gender norms call for – made her vulnerable to abuse. However, she persevered and eventually built a life in a community where she appeared to be respected and accepted.

As other authors have found, communities tend to regard a woman’s migration positively if she comes back from abroad economically and/or socially successful (Siddiqui 2001; Chantavanich 2001; Asis 2001; Sukamdi 2001). Although many other women whose migration outcomes were more mixed were confronted with gossip and community criticism, it appears that views on migrant women are not fixed. As Vertovec (2004:975) points out, the outlook and practices of those closely associated with the women and men who have migrated often shift as well. More research on this issue is needed.

9.7 Returned migrant women and work

While in Malaysia, many women had said that they wanted to continue generating an income after their return. They wanted to contribute to their household’s income; many also said that it made them feel good to work. They often envisioned working from home after they returned to Bangladesh.

Of the 29 women we met in Bangladesh, 16 were engaged in some form of income-generating activity or were urgently looking for work. For eight women it was a dire necessity, as there were no or few other sources of income in the household. Three of them had started doing garment work once more, but did not last long; it was badly paid and exhausting. A few other women who were in grave need of work were contemplating working in a garment factory when we last saw them.

Four women were engaged in income-generating activities that had been set up with money earned while abroad, as discussed earlier. These women were heading their own households. The investments made did not require hard labour. Four other
women were married and there was no urgent need for them to earn money. However, they had chosen to work from their homes, by rearing animals, renting out rooms or sewing clothes. Four other married women would have liked to pursue income-generating activities but there was no dire need and their husbands or in-laws did not approve of it. Six other women did not conduct any type of business and had no desire to.32

Many of the women who had not married or whose economic situation remained constrained felt that they were caught between the past – before migration – and a better post-migration future. It appeared that this period could last many years while one planned and continued to hope for a brighter future. Securing a stable economic base, including contemplating migrating again, seemed to form an integral part of the ‘between’ phase.

Some women felt that migration was simply not economically beneficial. Some of these women had already made money by investing in businesses in Bangladesh. Yet, for those women who had few options economically and socially, migration remained a suitable option.

The option of pursuing another migration was seriously considered by a third of the returned migrant women we met in Bangladesh. Some of the women, like Nazma, Hameeda and Latifa, felt that both their economic and their social prospects were dim. Migrating again was seen as an option to better their fate. These women said that they had made decisions concerning the allocation of their revenues that they would not make if they were to do it again. They would open their own bank accounts and not give their money to others. Additionally, seeking to migrate once more was partly a way to move beyond a social system in which viable options were perceived as limited, and to escape from painful personal situations. These women had gained confidence; they knew they could live abroad and sometimes longed for the enlarged social space they had known in Malaysia. Hence, migration can become cyclical (cf. Asis 2001; Chantavanich 2001).

Yet for these women, a second migration did not occur, as far as we know. Several women had paid fees to agents but their departure did not materialize either because there were no visas available or, in a few cases, the women backed out. Most women wanted to migrate to Malaysia again. They were wary about working as maids in the Middle East, since many stories about abuse had been circulated. However, there were few ways of getting to Malaysia. Officially, it was not possible, but since people had seen others go, they would believe the agents. They felt that they had few other choices. Aside from the policies intended to protect women (which in practice put them in danger, as explained in Chapter 3), there was a lack of adequate and verifiable information (cf. Spaan 1999). The main obstacle for the women who wanted to migrate again was a lack of money to pay the fee. Most women no longer had any savings and their relatives were not willing to lend them money. They did

32. In the cases of three women, we were unsure whether they would like to work. Their future plans were uncertain when we met them as they had just returned from Malaysia.
not support their relative’s possible re-migration. In addition, migration fees had increased considerably.

Although the Malaysian government required fees to be fair in order to resume migration from Bangladesh, in 2006 fees to go to Malaysia had increased by roughly 200% to 180,000 takas for men and 130,000 takas for women (various personal communications).

**Box 9.6: Nazma’s homecoming - V**

A month had passed and Nazma had not yet settled in; she felt restless and alien in the village. She had gone to Dhaka several times with her nephew to look for a job. Years before, she had met a nice, educated lady who lived in Dhaka. She had kept her phone number all that time and hoped that she might help her find a job. But she couldn’t. It was hard to find any work without connections, bribes and a college degree. Nazma had also asked her uncle, who was involved in an agricultural project sponsored by an NGO, to help her. After all, she had been trained in agriculture by an NGO before she had left. He said he would look around for work for her, but had not sounded all that convincing. The only jobs that were available were in the garment sector; however, this option would be her last resort – she thought. The earnings were so low; one could hardly survive as a garment worker.

Still, she wanted to leave the village. After distributing the gifts upon her return, an event that had proved unimpressive to most of the onlookers, people had started talking about her. They said unkind things, saying that she is ‘old’ now and still not married. A few days earlier, someone had maliciously pointed out that Abdul, who all those years back had not been allowed to marry her, was now happily married. He, and the refusal of both their families to agree to a marriage between them due to a family feud, had been an important reason why Nazma had gone abroad. ‘Abdul has a child already,’ the mischievous commenter had continued. Surely she had seen the child? Others asked her exactly what she had gained from going to bidesh. Their questions were vicious. They did not let her live in peace. At least in Malaysia people had not been bothered with discussing her life, she thought. She had written a letter to Rashid’s mother. Rashid had at least told her about Nazma, that much she knew. She had still not heard from him and she was very anxious. She had decided that if he did not come back in December, she would go to bidesh again. She had talked to a woman who knew a recruitment agent in Dhaka; she had taken down the address, just in case.

Several months later, her situation was the same. She occasionally travelled to Dhaka to search for employment via the sparse social network she had, but always unsuccessfully. We have had no news from her since and have not visited her village again.

**9.8 Personal gains**

The less tangible personal or concomitant consequences of migration are often but not always closely linked to the economic and social gains that migration brings. Many studies on Asian migrant women and on factory women in general, highlight women’s perceived increase in self-esteem and the value that women attach to this.
The experience of migration or of factory work often increases women’s confidence in their abilities and skills, and they become stronger and more self-reliant (Amin 1997:34; Tacoli 1999; INSTRAW 2000; Asis 2001; Beesey 2001; Willis 2001; Asis, Huang & Yeoh 2004:207).

As seen in Chapters 7 and 8, many of the women took great pride in the working and social skills they had obtained in Malaysia. They had an increased sense of self-confidence, and the various social skills the women had acquired (e.g. being able to go out and arrange ‘things’ or being capable of ‘talking to people’) were valued. As seen in this chapter, several of the women have benefited from the social skills, confidence and ability to persevere that they acquired in Malaysia. The women who had economically assisted their households through their migration were often admired by their relatives. Relatives also said that the women had acquired ‘knowledge’. It was not uncommon for these relatives to value the advice and feedback provided by these women; they had thus gained authority within the family.

For some women, their assets – that is, their houses and land – combined with their frank self-confidence appeared to have led to more egalitarian marital relations. Nahar is a case in point (box 9.4 and 9.5). Her husband, who had moved in with her, wanted to move to his own village, as he would have more prestige there. Nahar, however, refused to move, feeling that she would lose her relative independence if they did: not only her husband but also her in-laws would have power over her. She has carefully built her life, and the house and the land are hers. While being a ‘good’ Bangladeshi wife (i.e. being pious and modest and taking care of her family), she is bold too. ‘I cannot leave here,’ she told her husband; they therefore did not move.

Some of the women for whom migration had not turned out to be a success either socially or economically, felt that it would have been better not to have gone. However, several women still felt that they had personally benefited from their migration. Latifa, for example, had come back indebted; she had spent a lot of money on a new visa and work permit while still in Malaysia, and neither had materialized. She had entrusted people with her money, and lost it. Upon her return to Bangladesh, the husband-to-be her family had arranged for her a long time before, decided not to marry her after all. Latifa’s family, to whom Latifa was like an ‘eldest son’, had debts; the situation was dire. Latifa had been looking for a job ever since her return; she had worked in a retail shop in Dhaka for a while, but had quit because the salary was paid irregularly. Worry was carved on her face. Nevertheless, she explained that she had learnt much in bidesh. While being interviewed, Latifa had put many questions to Farhana, my research assistant. Later on she referred to this, saying that now she asks people questions: ‘I try to understand things. I can face people and I know about different cultures.’ In both 2004 and 2006 she referred to these changes that she valued. Latifa wanted to go to bidesh again, knowing that this time she would do things differently, that she had learned from her past experiences. Her future and that of her family were undecided when we last saw her. But one thing was sure: were she to go to bidesh again, she would make different decisions.
9.9 Conclusion

Kabeer (1998) recalls in her evaluative study of the effects of micro-credit programmes on women’s situations in Bangladesh that the women made a very explicit equation between the money they earned and the love (recognition, prestige) they received: ‘(…) because in an increasingly monetized economy, in which they have hitherto been denied access to any cash of their own, money represented purchasing power, prestige and value’ (1998:67). Their monetary achievements and the consequent availability of money gave them a certain level of prestige. Several studies on returned migrant women in Asia came to similar conclusions: migrant women who had succeeded economically were likely to have their social standing positively affected as well (Sukamdi 2001; Beesey 2001; Siddiqui 2001). Siddiqui (2001:83) found for Bangladeshi returned migrant women that those who had failed economically were stigmatized and blamed for it, and suffered greatly. While broadly speaking our study came to similar conclusions, we also found that economic success did not automatically lead to social prestige. Similarly, there were a few women who were not economically successful, yet they had married men of their choice and were socially accepted. In addition, for a few women, earning money had not been the issue.

As shown in this chapter, the migration outcomes were very diverse and complex, and should not be reduced to simplifying labels such as ‘success’ and ‘failure’. While wages had been lower than expected, many women had managed to save money and invest part of it to their liking. Some of these investments failed as a result of bad investment choices or of trusting too easily those they hoped would take care of and commit to them. As a consequence, some of the women were left socially and economically bereft. Other women, instead of trying to bind men to them by giving them money, had strengthened their fallback position and/or economic independence by investing in income-generating businesses or by building houses and buying land in their name.

Some women’s business and personal endeavours encountered sociocultural opposition; the unequal position of men and women in society make women socio-economically vulnerable to those who opposed their agency. Nevertheless, despite opposition, many women had increased their scope of economic and social choices: approximately two thirds of the women who had aspired to marry a partner of their liking had managed to do so. Some women – especially those whose children had suffered during their absence – regretted some of the consequences of their migration, as did several of the women who had earned little or invested unsuccessfully. Yet, many women felt that they had personally benefited. Many women had migrated because their socio-economic room to manoeuvre had been severely limited. They had left to enlarge this ‘space’ and hence expand their future options. While the consequences of the women’s migration were clearly not always unequivocally positive, many women enlarged their social, economic and personal space through their migration experiences.
Table 9.5: summary of post-migration data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factory</th>
<th>Extensively interviewed while in Malaysia '99/01</th>
<th>Visited in Bangladesh '01</th>
<th>Visited in: '04</th>
<th>Visited in: '06/07</th>
<th>Land bought</th>
<th>Land in own name</th>
<th>Income-generating investments</th>
<th>Lost gold or money that others promised to bring home</th>
<th>Lending money to husband/potential husband while in Malaysia (in takas)</th>
<th>Marital status before migration; desire to marry/remarry</th>
<th>Desired to get married, succeeded</th>
<th>Engaged in income-generating activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Nahar</td>
<td>F3 R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>30000</td>
<td>240,000</td>
<td>UM yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>tailoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Latifa</td>
<td>F2 R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>40000</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>UM yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>need to, not found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Shannaz</td>
<td>F2 R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>D yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>no, would like to marry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Sabina</td>
<td>F1 R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>50,000</td>
<td>D yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no, would like to rear animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Salma</td>
<td>F2 R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td>D yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hel.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>W no</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>need to, not found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Parveen</td>
<td>F2 R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>M no</td>
<td></td>
<td>liquor business</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Shazeda</td>
<td>E* R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>R</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>M no</td>
<td></td>
<td>land, business</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Laizu</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>M no</td>
<td></td>
<td>no</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Parul</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>R</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>M no</td>
<td></td>
<td>money lending</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Leyla</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>M yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td>cleaner (offices)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Razia</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>M no</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Income</td>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>SL</td>
<td>UM</td>
<td>Need of Job</td>
<td>Comment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Salma</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Hashida</td>
<td>F3</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Nazma</td>
<td>F2</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>30000</td>
<td>Suspected</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>UM yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Shuli</td>
<td>F2</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>UM yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>no</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Batashi</td>
<td>F1</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>UM</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>no</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No, would like to</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Rehana</td>
<td>F2</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>no</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Rahana</td>
<td>F2</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>110,000</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>yes****</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>not known</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Hameeda</td>
<td>F2</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>60,000</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No need of job, not found</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Dolly</td>
<td>F2</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Farhana</td>
<td>F1</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>††</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>UM</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>no</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Rubya</td>
<td>F1</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>UM yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>not known</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Fahima</td>
<td>S†††</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>renting out rooms</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Comla</td>
<td>F1</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>raising animals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Ferdousi</td>
<td>F1</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>no would like to</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Fahima</td>
<td>F2</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>no</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Shahina</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>W yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>not known</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Shanty</td>
<td>T†††††</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>80,000</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>need of job not found</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>investment in rickshaws</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Helena</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>no</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
R = Repeatedly visited over the course of several months.
UM = unmarried, D = divorced, W = widowed
* E = an electronics factory
** Razia’s primary reason for migrating was to pay back her family debts of 100,000 takas, which she did.
*** Parul came from a well-off family. She had left for Malaysia to get away from a brief but very violent marriage. There was no need for her to send money back.
**** Shuli did marry, but not the man she had once loved and lent the 8000 ringgits to.
† At the age of 15, Farhana had been sent by her relatives to earn money to repay her father’s debt. The money she sent back covered only a part of the loan. She became ill from all the pressure put on her and left Malaysia prematurely
†† Ashrimp factory
††† A textile plant
CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSIONS

10.1 The pre-migration stage

The question ‘Why do people migrate?’ is pivotal to all migration studies. As shown by the theoretical discussion in Chapter 2, migration theorists can be divided into two camps: those who take a functionalist approach and state that migrants’ individual economic aspirations are the main impetus behind migration, and those who take a historical structural approach and assert that the main impetus is economic, social and political inequality, in other words, that migration is a decision that is more or less forced upon people by structural factors. Although some scholars have attempted to reconcile the two approaches, the rift between agency and structure has not been entirely overcome.

Despite increased scholarly interest, there has been little concerted effort to integrate gender into theories of international migration theory (Boyd & Grieco 2003:1; Mahler & Pessar 2006:28). This is evidenced by the literature on female migration. Many migration scholars have argued that women’s migrations are largely sacrificial: women predominantly migrate out of feelings of responsibility for their family members; their trips abroad are seen as embedded in their identities as ‘dutiful daughters’ or ‘altruistic mothers’ (Chant 1992; Bjeren 1997:242; Barber 1997; Yeoh & Huang 2000; Chantavanich 2001; Oishi 2005; Arya & Roy, 2006). According to these scholars, repressive structural forces embedded in gender inequality and poverty are the underlying reasons for female migration.

Other studies, however, have shown that many women actively choose to migrate in order to improve both their financial and their social situation. It is found that women migrate to escape oppressive or conflictual situations or marriages, or to seek a brighter future in which they will have more decision-making power over their own lives (Morokvasic 1984, 2003; Grasmuck & Pesar, 1991; Tacoli 1999; Kofman et al. 2000; Gamburd 2000; Phizacklea 2003; Mahler & Pessar 2006). In other words, many women migrate to pursue better lives.

There are clearly no universal or clear-cut answers as to why women migrate. Individuals’ motivations differ, as do their social contexts. Nevertheless, it is striking that scholars who study women from the same country of origin and similar socio-economic strata sometimes come to rather conflicting conclusions as to why women migrate.

This study has shown that structural and individual reasons for migration intersect in complex ways. The economic situation of Bangladesh (i.e. economic deprivation and high rates of unemployment) were important incentives for migration for most of the women and men with whom we spoke. To many, another reason to migrate was the fact that employment for women in Bangladesh is structurally limited as a result of gender norms and ideals. The endeavours of pioneering Bangladeshi coin-
cided with the need of entrepreneurial Malaysians for more workers. These factors together with the religious proximity of the two countries resulted in the 1990s in a migration system that enabled large numbers of Bangladeshi workers to migrate to Malaysia on temporary work visas.

Within this structural context, individual motivations and incentives played major roles. When my research assistant and I first met the women and conducted a survey, two thirds of the women stated that the primary reason for their migration had been economic and was primarily related to helping their family. One third of the women stated they had migrated for personal reasons, many of which were related to overcoming adversity in marriage. This finding is largely in line with the findings of many scholars who stress the altruistic argument mentioned above. However, the numerous informal discussions we had during the study made it clear that very often the actual situation was rather different and more complex. For many a woman, stating that she had migrated for the economic benefit of the family was largely a safe and socially correct answer. As the women’s confidence in us increased and they felt more at ease within the Bangladeshi Malaysian community, different stories were told and revealed other factors that had led to their migration. While some women had migrated primarily for the benefit of others, most also had reasons of their own.

As extensively discussed throughout this study, marriage plays a central role in the lives of Bangladeshi women. It was found that for most unmarried and divorced women, migration had been an individual and a proactive way to enlarge their say in marriage issues. To some young women, migration had been a way to escape humiliating or painful situations, for instance if they knew that a desired marriage would not materialize because their parents opposed it, or they had returned to their parental homes to escape unfulfilling and abusive marriages. For at least a third of the unmarried women, marriage negotiations had been ongoing before their departure for bidesh, but the groom had not been of their own choosing. Migration was a way to postpone marriage. Migration was also a means to fulfill another desire: many young women would have liked to continue their studies, yet their families had decided otherwise for financial or gendered reasons. To these women, migration was a way to ‘develop themselves’, as they put it. While some lacked the economic means to marry a desirable husband, others did not want to marry yet. It was generally felt that one could not escape marriage. Nor did the women necessarily want to: many dreamed of one day being ‘happily married ever after’. By migrating, most of the young women hoped that upon their return with the money they had earned, they would be able have a say in who they would marry, when and under which conditions.

For many of the married, divorced or widowed women, migration was a way to enlarge their social space, as well as to earn money in order to better their own and their children’s lives. Migration was an escape from bossy, lazy or abusive husbands or relatives on whom they depended financially and socially.

The findings of this study show that while such economic and structural factors as poverty and gender inequality played a crucial role in the Bangladeshi women’s decision to migrate, many were individually motivated to overcome gender impas-
ses in order to enlarge their own social and economic space. Hence, their migrations were not mere reflections of gender oppression but a result of their determination to improve their lives. This became even clearer when analysing the processes of decision making that had led to the women’s migrations.

In migration theory, the household or the family is generally identified as the locus in which decision making concerning migration takes place. Earlier theorists emphasized that migration is a family strategy that promotes the best interests of all (Boyd 1989), while other scholars have highlighted the uneven power relations within families and the influence this has on decision-making power. In other words, to understand people’s migration it is important to capture the dynamics of decision making (Wolf 1999; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Kofman et al. 2000; Phizacklea 2003; Mahler & Pessar 2006). Some studies have shown the proactive role that women have taken in the decision-making process (Gasmuck & Pessar 1991; Gamburg 2000; Phizacklea 2003).

While many of the scholars who studied female migration refer to the importance of the decision-making process, it is interesting to note that the actual decision-making process is usually given only scant attention in the research methodologies that are applied in these empirical studies. Nevertheless, most scholars who adhere to structural explanations of gender subordination concur that the migration decision is often made for women (Yeoh & Huang 2000; Chantavanich 2001; Arya & Roy 2006).

Our study found that most women had had an active stake in their migrations. In the initial survey, almost half of the women stated that their migration had been a mutual decision. While almost as many said that it had been primarily their own decision, the in-depth interviews revealed that the proportion was in fact larger. The decision-making process had often been tedious and complex, but the large majority of the women we spoke to in depth had initiated their own move. Again, we found that the sociocultural desirability of relatives’ initiative as opposed to one’s own was an underlying reason for these differences in research findings. Of all the women we spoke to in depth, more than half had had to overcome major obstacles in order to obtain their relatives’ consent. One fifth of these women made their migration arrangements in secrecy without seeking the consent or approval of their relatives. Consequently, some left in circumstances that were rife with conflict. The fact that it was not always easy for women to obtain their relatives’ consent is directly related to conventional interpretations of purdah and gender roles: women ought not to migrate alone. Relatives worried about the women’s safety and izzat, and about the family’s honour and how the community would react.

Many of the women had had to convince their fathers and brothers and had strategized towards this end. Many had used very similar tactics: drawing on their social and symbolic resources; in other words, capitalizing on the confidence and support of influential family members with whom they had good relations. Some women had already been working and thus economically contributing to the household, which had improved their social standing and bargaining power in the family. It was thus easier for them to obtain consent. Apart from social and symbolic capital and
the economic incentive, such personal traits as a woman’s perseverance, boldness and determination also played important roles in obtaining the required consent.

However, for all the women – whether or not they had prior job experience and irrespective of their personal motivations for migration – ‘migrating for the betterment of the family’ was the incentive that persuaded their guardians to give their consent. Because their personal incentives were generally not in line with gender norms, they were usually not mentioned.

Our findings show that for many of the Bangladeshi women, the decision-making process had been complex and had actively engaged them in redefining gendered boundaries of appropriate behaviour for women. The interviews we held in the migrants’ neighbourhoods and villages in Bangladesh revealed that many women who wanted to migrate had not managed to get their families’ consent and were thus unable to migrate. More research into this area is needed.

An interesting question pertains to the motivations and decision-making processes of the male Bangladeshi who had migrated to Malaysia: were their motivations and decision-making processes different from those of the women? While an increasing number of migration studies purport to look at gender, few incorporate female and male migrants in their analyses. Although many studies have focused on female migration only, gender pertains to both women and men: the working of gender can be adequately understood only by revealing the possible differences in experiences, motivations and perceptions between men and women. We found that the Bangladeshi men’s migrations had usually been less voluntarily than those of the Bangladeshi women: while twenty-five per cent of the men had migrated because they had been sent by their fathers and elder brothers, the figure for the women is only seven per cent. This finding is perhaps not so surprising in light of the prevalent definitions of masculinity: sons are expected to contribute to the extended household and obey their fathers and elder brothers. Thus, men’s migrations were largely in line with conventional gender norms and definitions of masculinity, while the women’s were not.

Although the economic situation of the male migrants’ households was generally better than that of the women’s households, the predominant reason underlying the men’s migration was to earn money for their families. This was also the case for those men whose migrations had been their own choice (about half of all the men we spoke to). It is however important to note that, as in the case of the Bangladeshi women, to many men migration was also a personal desire: they wanted to improve their life opportunities and to escape a gloomy future in Bangladesh. The high unemployment rates meant that they saw few future prospects in their home country; the migration myth was appealing, and a ticket to bidesh was also a ticket to a better life. Most of the men were unmarried. Although their personal status and honour was not tied to their marital status as it is for Bangladeshi women, marriage did play a role. Many men felt they could not marry unless they had created a stable economic future and would thus be reliable providers for their future families. Some considered Malaysia a ‘between’ phase that would enable them to migrate to Europe, Australia or even the United States.
In short, gender roles, expectations and concomitant limitations featured in women’s and men’s migration motivations and decisions, albeit in different ways. In the literature, female migration is often indiscriminately portrayed as a continuation of women’s gendered oppression. The finding of this study, however, is that both the women and the men had migrated partly to enlarge their own scope of socio-economic choices. It is interesting to note that more men than women migrated primarily to fulfil their classic gender role of earning for the family, while no migration discourse associates men’s migrations with such notions as ‘dutifulness’ or ‘altruism’ – yet women’s migrations are.

The women’s decision to migrate was often in line with a simultaneous desire to earn money to help their families. Structural and personal factors were intricately interwoven in the migration motivation, often in similar but nevertheless personal, unique ways. Theoretical frameworks employed to understand migration should therefore incorporate the dynamics of personal and structural factors while employing a gendered perspective and incorporating, when applicable, both female and male migrants.

Labelling women’s motivations ‘altruistic’ or ‘sacrificial’ and implicitly portraying them as meek victims does not reflect their reality. Taking women seriously as agents means also taking into serious consideration their relationships and commitment to others. To this end, scholars should listen to their stories with open minds, as this study shows that women are inclined to relate somewhat socially correct versions of their motivations so as to present themselves as ‘good’ women for reasons related to prestige and safety. In a lot of sending societies, female migration, like many other gender-related issues, entails socioculturally sensitive aspects.

The above has methodological consequences. Research methods should be sensitive to the fears and vulnerability of the research subjects. The methods chosen must be able to reveal potential socioculturally sensitive patterns and motivations. Thus, qualitative research methods must be applied to supplement quantitative methods. Longitudinal research – namely repeated encounters over a period of time – is generally required in order to create confidence and trust and to build rapport. Researchers must make a conscious effort to let go of preconceived ideas, hypothesis and ideologies while listening to the stories of women and men. This is a challenging requirement, one that I too must meet.

Likewise, researchers must not fall prey to stereotypical gender beliefs about women and men: we must recognize the gender beliefs that are so ingrained in our social structures that we hold them unconsciously. While a lot of effort is devoted to definitions of femininity and women’s roles, definitions of masculinity are less studied. More research into definitions of masculinities and femininities and how they relate to one another will deepen our understanding of migration dynamics.

In order to actually migrate, the migrants we spoke to had relied on the migration institution: a conglomerate of middlemen and agents who recruit for Malaysian agents and industries and provide the necessary papers. The migrant institution is easy to access in Bangladesh. The informal networks are widely spread and loosely organized; everyone knows someone who has contacts or a piece of information. Most women accessed the migrant institution with the help of male relatives. Howe-
ver, information about jobs and recruiters cannot be verified. This in combination with the grapevine stories perpetuates the migration myth; fees are high and so are the risks – yet the former are paid and the latter taken. Aspiring Bangladeshi migrants often lose money or end up with migration papers that are not valid. Almost 20% of our respondents have relatives who had lost money while trying to obtain an overseas work visa from an agent. The average amount lost was 93,000 takas (approximately 2000 euros). While migration fees are arbitrary and differ, the men had paid around 50% more than the women. To protect the rights of migrants or potential migrants, adequate law enforcement is crucial.

10.2 The migration stage

The working and living conditions of temporary migrants abroad have received relatively little academic attention in either empirical studies or theoretical endeavours. The vast majority of migration theory focuses on permanent migrants and is thus less suitable for the analyses of temporary labour migration.

Various bodies of literature were instructive for the analytical framework of this study. Drawing on transnationalism, I departed from the recognition that temporary migrants are socioculturally dually embedded: their focus is on both the host and the sending country. To adequately understand the migration dynamics and the experiences of migrants, four domains were included in the analytical framework, namely the domains of work, the community, the household and the self.

To answer the question whether Bangladeshi migrant workers were capable of fulfilling their aims in Malaysia, it was necessary to first look into the conditions of work, contracts and actual levels of remunerations. There is often little legal protection or institutional support for temporary migrants, and this makes many migrants vulnerable to discriminatory treatment and abuse (Abella 2006; Wickramasekara 2007). Few studies in the field of international migration have focused on factory workers. The vast literature on domestic migration and factory women employed in FTZs is most relevant when looking at migrants who work abroad in the industrial sector. Early studies on factory women mainly focused on the exploitation of factory workers (Daud 1985; Ong 1987; Heyzer 1989). More recently, studies have increasingly emphasized that despite deplorable working conditions and low payments, many factory women value the impact their jobs have on some aspects of their lives, such as an increase in their decision-making power and self-esteem, and sometimes in their social standing (Wolf 1992; Pearson 1998; Gandhi & Shah, 2002; Chhachhi 2004).

To understand factory workers’ situation, Chhachhi (2004:33) introduced the concept of ‘gendered labour regimes’:

Negotiated orders that emerge through the interplay between state intervention (implicit and explicit legal regulation), managerial strategies and practices of labour control and restructuring, worker’s subjectivities/agency and the social institutions of the labour market and the household.
Among others, Chhachhi draws on Burawoy’s (1985) modes of labour management. In the absence of state intervention, ‘despotic’ factory regimes prevail. When the state starts to intervene and legal regulations are put in place, a more hegemonic factory regime emerges. Chhachhi emphasizes that laws and legal entitlements alone are insufficient to distinguish between factory regimes. Law enforcement is the distinguishing aspect, often a process evolving over time and the result of workers’ organization and struggle (Chhachhi 2004:32).

While it was beyond the scope of this study to involve Malaysian workers, the findings in combination with secondary sources indicate the existence of two labour regimes in Malaysia, namely one that applies to local workers and one that applies to migrant workers. The former come under a regime in which they are protected by law. While law enforcement is not optimal (Todd, Lansbury & Davis 2004:2; Bhopal & Rowley 2005), legal institutions to ensure law enforcement are in place and there are some active unions. Migrant workers come under a regime from which legal protection and law enforcement are virtually absent; migrants’ rights are not ensured. While in theory migrants can join unions, in practice they are largely prevented from doing so. Work permits are tied to employers, and if a migrant loses his or her job or chooses to switch jobs, he or she loses the right to be in the country. Although there were no significant wage differences observed between female and male migrant workers, more Bangladeshi women than men had been sent home for having a relationship with the opposite sex. Surveillance or paternalistic moralism had been passed down from male relatives in Bangladesh to factory owners.

Distinguishing between the factors that at different levels of analysis contributed to migrant workers’ working conditions and the fulfilment of their economic goals sheds further light on the factors that constitute a ‘migrant labour regime’. First, at the level of the migrant institution, the migrants’ attempts to realize their economic aspirations were frustrated by discrepancies between the promises made by agents and the wages they actually received. Agencies and middlemen in Bangladesh cooperate with agents in Malaysia and with Malaysian employers in labour-intensive industries. No institution adequately supervises the activities of these agencies, and job information cannot be verified. High wages are promised. It could be argued that migrants too readily believe the agents and the stories that constitute the migration myth. Many of the Bangladeshi workers counter-argued that they had little choice. Promises made while in Bangladesh frequently did not match the situation the migrants encountered in Malaysia. A closely related problem is the exorbitantly high fees charged by agents: it took many migrants as long as two years to repay the initial investment.

Second, the migrants’ did not earn as much as envisioned as a result of factors at the company level. The employers – like the agents – frequently made promises that they did not fulfill. Contracts that had been signed in Bangladesh with representatives of the Malaysian or multinational company were breached in three of the four main factories where the Bangladeshi migrant workers were employed. New contracts that were different from the ones received in Bangladesh were handed out upon the migrants’ arrival, or the original contracts were simply not honoured in terms of basic wages, allowances or annual wage increments. In many factories
overtime rates were not paid according to Malaysian labour law. Some migrants arrived to find that their labour was not needed at all, and they were sent back to Bangladesh with no compensation for the personal losses.

The third reason why many migrants were not able to attain their economic goals is related to the turmoil in the global economy that resulted from the Asian financial crisis. The migrants were affected in three interrelated ways:

— Exchange rates between the Malaysian ringgit and the Bangladeshi taka had decreased significantly, affecting the real value of the remittances sent home and the earnings brought back. The decrease amounted to 36% in the first year after the crisis, and an average of 18% in the four years following the start of the economic crisis.
— While many migrant workers had lost their jobs (they had been the first to be made redundant), most of the migrants in this study retained their jobs. However, the employers tried to increase their competitive edge by further reducing their labour costs, and many of the migrants suffered significant wage reductions.
— The high inflation rate led to an increase in food prices; between 1995 and 2000, the increase amounted to 28%.

Finally, the extent to which migrants were able to attain their economic goals was also determined by state policies and law enforcement. While the laws of Malaysia do not discriminate against migrant workers, in practice the rights of migrant workers are not fully protected (MTUC 2005).

To ensure that employers do not substitute foreign labour for local labour, in the early 1990s a levy was imposed on each foreign worker employed in Malaysia. In practice, however, the levy is deducted from the migrants’ wages. As the law does not prevent employers from doing this, its original purpose is defeated. Levy deductions are considerable, amounting to 25-30% of the basic monthly wage of the migrants we studied. Since work permits bind migrants to their employers and they must leave the country if their contracts are terminated, employers have a huge amount of leverage over their workers. If workers feel that they are not being treated lawfully and challenge their employers, they are usually threatened with dismissal. If dismissed, they become undocumented and hence are ‘illegal’. If they file a case in court, they can stay for three more months on a special permit. However, they must pay 100 ringgits a month for the permit and are not allowed to work during the 3-month period – and court cases often take longer than that to be settled. As this situation makes seeking legal redress for unfair treatment or breaches of contract rather difficult (Syed Shahir 2006), few migrants take their employers to court.

Several studies found that many employers prefer foreign to local workers, thus substantiating the dual labour regime thesis. According to employers, migrant workers are very ‘diligent and compliant’, as they, unlike local workers, cannot easily job-hop. Some also readily admit that foreign workers are cheaper than local workers (Lee & Sivananthiran 1996:89; Rudnick 1996; Abdul-Aziz 2001; Smakman 2004; Kung & Wang 2006).
Surprisingly, most academic studies that focus on the Malaysian industrial sector do not acknowledge that a third of its labour force consists of migrant workers, even though this has been the case since the early 1990s (cf. Caspersz 1998; Rasiah 2001; Elias 2005; Bhopal & Rowley 2005). The fact that migrants are often treated and paid differently is ignored, as is the effect that this has on all workers and working relations in general. Hence a somewhat limited if not distorted representation of labour relations in the manufacturing sector is provided. More research on the industrial sector in Malaysia is needed that incorporates all workers, both local and foreign, in order to expose possible differences and dynamics and the impact of such on industrial relations.

Many of the Bangladeshi migrant workers tried to discuss their maltreatment and the unfair payments with their management, but generally to no avail. A few attempts at collective action had been made – at a high price: those who initiate such actions are usually sent home, which effectively puts an end to the workers’ attempts to obtain their rights through collective action. Joining a union (if there was one to join, that is) was usually not regarded as an option; migrants were scared of repercussions from employers.

It should be noted that in contemporary Malaysia, labourers have limited bargaining power. Labour laws, in as far as they are intended to protect workers’ welfare, are often poorly administered and generally more supportive of managerial prerogatives. Union activity, although prevalent, is curbed; only a small percentage of workers are unionized. However, the scope to redress unjust labour practices is wider for local workers than for foreign workers. Local workers often feel resentful towards migrant workers, because the hiring of foreign workers has worsened the locals’ bargaining position. Fracturing the workforce along ethnic lines has been common practice in Malaysia ever since colonial times; the hiring of migrant labour and the related policies and regulations simply reiterate this practice (cf. Garcés-Mascareñas 2006).

The Malaysian Trade Union Congress (MTUC) has rightly called for the equal treatment of foreign and local workers, as this would ultimately benefit all workers (MTUC 2005). While seeking legal redress or organizing collective actions were not regarded viable options, this did not mean that Bangladeshi migrants did not seek to change their situation. Despite the fact that switching employers was illegal and entailed serious risks of being detained and deported, an estimated 20-30% of the Bangladeshi women employed in the four main factories we studied had left their original employer for a new one. It is thought that the Bangladeshi men change jobs even more frequently. Migrants change employers for two reasons: out of fear of being sent home by their original employers, or because they are unhappy with the working conditions and payments in the original factory. If workers cannot obtain their rights in the company they were hired for, the only way out of their plight is to look for jobs elsewhere. To obtain the required ‘official’ documents, they have to make another significant investment (an average of 2200-4000 ringgits).

Many migrants who are not paid as promised or as stipulated by law see no option but to look for another employer by absconding or overstaying and becoming ‘undocumented’. Because documented and undocumented migration statuses are intra-
cately linked (cf. Rudnick 1996:75; Garcés-Mascareñas 2006:11), the lack of law enforcement and the inadequate protection of migrant workers’ rights contribute to what is regarded as a major problem in Malaysia: the preponderance of ‘illegal’ migrants.

In terms of workers’ struggles and change, the literature on women factory workers often analyses this in terms of empowerment potential. These studies aim to reveal women’s agency and to counteract structuralist theories that have focused only on oppression. Factors that are highlighted include economic parameters, the extent to which workers organize and the impact on their decision-making power.

Some scholars have focused on what are called ‘covert forms of resistance’ (Constable 1999; Mullings 1999; Harington 2000). These studies are theoretically inspired by James Scott’s (1985) work on peasants’ ‘everyday forms of resistance’ in rural Malaysia. Their analyses stress the positive empowerment potential of women’s work. Sometimes, however, the emphasis on these ‘everyday forms of resistance’ appears to overstate the actual structural effects on payments, working conditions and women’s lives in general and can arguably be rather misleading (cf. Harrington 2000). I found that the Bangladeshi migrant women also resorted to similar ‘covert’ actions of disobedience; however, in my analysis the actions need to be seen as coping mechanisms rather than as ‘resistance’ per se. The non-confrontational acts of disobedience by which supervisors were outsmarted had no structural effect on the migrants’ wages or treatment in general. These acts were nonetheless of great significance, as at times working conditions were somewhat improved. Moreover, these acts greatly helped to maintain a sense of self, of dignity and of being in charge.

The way Bangladeshi men and women reacted to their working situation differed somewhat. Both men and women had tried to instigate collective acts; these men and women were generally higher educated. Yet, generally women were more fearful of being sent home than the men and they spoke up less frequently. While both had much to lose by being sent home, the women were liable to lose more: their prospects were closely related to maintaining or increasing their ‘honour’, economically, socially and physically.

More men than women had absconded. The men were better connected and more mobile, while the women were more concerned about their safety, particularly their physical safety. Although few mentioned cases of sexual abuse (and no-one admitted having been subjected to such abuse), there was concern over physical safety. Another closely related difference between men and women was their outspokenness concerning their situation. Whereas the women were often hesitant to talk with us about work issues, the men were eager to discuss the injustices they observed. Although the relatively higher educational level of most of the men seemed to play a role in this, other gendered reasons played an equally important role. Bangladeshi men’s socializing and collective experience are generally more geared to insisting on their rights and speaking out about injustices than women’s are. The women’s collective experience generally is that it is wiser and more beneficial to act prudently and discreetly. Again, the women felt that they had more to lose and were less trus-
ting of strangers. While the men tended to exaggerate their situation, the women were inclined to downplay payments and treatment that were not in line with the law.

A further difference between the men and the women concerns job satisfaction. The women’s job satisfaction was significantly higher than the men’s. In contrast to the men, the women frequently emphasized the non-wage benefits they gained from their employment. They were conscious of the skills and working experience they had acquired, and many were proud of them. Although the women also felt a general dissatisfaction with wage levels and working conditions, an equally valid feeling of personal gain in terms of skills, increased self-esteem and self-confidence prevailed.

There was a clear difference in the information about working conditions that migrant women and men divulged while still in Malaysia and after their return. Some felt more comfortable relating cases of mistreatment after they had returned home. However, some women downplayed what they had earlier experienced as adverse; hardship had been forgotten. To fully understand migrants’ context and situations, fieldwork should be conducted in both the sending and the receiving country.

An interesting observation concerning employers’ general preference for female labour can be made. The vast literature on factory women emphasizes the importance of the feminine traits of ‘docility’ and ‘dexterity’ in labour-intensive industries, which is believed to be an important reason for the predominance of women workers in the sector. However, the fact that many male Bangladeshis were hired and that employers often preferred them to local female workers (Rudnick 1996; Smakman 2004) indicates that the desired attributes of workers are not related to the workers’ sex or biological inclinations; rather, these are largely influenced by the workers’ position and relative social and economic vulnerability within society at large and, more specifically, vis-à-vis employers. In short, a worker’s sex alone does not necessarily reveal his or her position in the labour hierarchy in a factory. Researchers should be careful not to generalize about issues related to gender.

In sum, local and migrant workers operate to some extent under different labour regimes. The data shows that Chhachhi’s (2004) concept of gendered labour regimes is also relevant to the definition of a ‘migrant labour regime’. What must be added to her definition when developing the concept of a migrant labour regime are factors relating to the impact the migrant institution and the global economy have on migrants’ working and living conditions. Failure to protect the rights of migrant workers and the unequal treatment of local and migrant workers resulting from inadequate regulations and law enforcement lie at the heart of why migrant workers are not treated well and do not earn what they are entitled to.

Recent policy formulations and implementation in Malaysia do not seem to indicate that migrant workers’ rights are better protected now than they were in the 1990s when the migrants in this study first went to bidesh (Syed Shahir 2006). For theoretical purposes it can be asserted that the migrant labour regime in Malaysia is determined by a complex of state intervention and law enforcement, and by the workings of the migrant institution, the managerial practices of labour control, the dynamics that pertain to the global economy and the migrant workers’ agency. While this study shows that the structural context clearly has a negative impact on the socio-
economic situation of migrants, we found that on an individual level, the working experience gave many of the Bangladeshi women a sense of fulfilment.

The findings of this study point to the importance of incorporating structural as well as individual levels of analyses when studying issues related to labour. The analytical framework of studies that seek to understand the situation of factory workers needs to accommodate apparent paradoxes, namely of hardship and unjust working conditions, as well as a certain level of job satisfaction and a sense of socioeconomic gain.

To adequately answer the question whether the Bangladeshi migrants were able to achieve their goals in Malaysia, it was necessary to also look into migrants’ social lives, relationships and environments. Most migration studies focus on permanent migration and concentrate on adaptation and integration issues. For most temporary migrants, residency is not an option. Consequently, migration theories and analytical frameworks are often less appropriate for the analyses of short-term, contract migration. Studies on transnationalism are arguably most suitable when studying temporary migration. These have shown that migrants often retain a ‘dual frame of reference’, a dual orientation to the ‘here’ (the host country) and to the ‘there’ (the country of origin). Aspects of life ‘here’ and ‘there’ are monitored and perceived as complementary aspects of a single space experience, as they impact migrants’ everyday lives, activities, attitudes, perceptions and decisions (Guarnizo 1997; Vertovec 2004:975; Itzigsohn & Giorguli-Saucedo 2005:900). Although some scholars do look at gender, gender has not been structurally integrated into theoretical frameworks that are based on transnationalism. Moving from one place to another, however, often means moving between different gendered spaces. Gender roles, values and norms may differ in the receiving country from those in the home country. Migration may cause social norms and behaviour that were habitually reproduced to be seen in a different light, which may result in a sociocultural reorientation. However, as migration scholars have stressed (Anthias 2001; Parreñas 2001), moving to a society that has a different set of gender norms is not necessarily ‘liberating’ or ‘constraining’, but can mean different things in different domains and contexts to different women. As some studies have shown, social surveillance can differ profoundly for men and women (Espín 1999; Morokvasic 2003). In the receiving country, female migrants’ social behaviour and activities are frequently closely monitored by the migrant community.

To explore migrant women’s bifocality, it is helpful to focus on the domain of the community, the domestic domain and the domain of self. Although Bangladesh and Malaysia are largely Muslim societies, gender norms and roles are not the same in the two countries. Malaysian women have historically been more visible in the public realm. Factory women are no longer stigmatized, as they are in Bangladesh. As far as marriage is concerned, the dowry system (which is not an Islamic tradition) does not exist in Malaysia; instead, upon marriage, the husband pays a bride price to his wife’s family. Nowadays, women have gained a pivotal say in choosing their grooms; dating and having boyfriends is relatively common in Malaysia. For the purpose of this study, more pivotal than actual differences in gender positions bet-
ween women from these two countries were the Bangladeshi women’s perceptions of differences between their lives and the lives of Malaysian women. In addition to liking the political and economic climate in Malaysia, Bangladeshi women highly appreciated Malaysian women’s relative self-determination, especially their right to work and the social acceptability of their working. By earning a salary, Malaysian women were perceived to be less dependent on men and to have more alternatives if a marriage ended due to death or divorce than women in Bangladesh.

Within the realm of the Bangladeshi community in Malaysia, we found that Bangladeshi men in Malaysia largely regarded their countrywomen’s migration to Malaysia as a violation of appropriate gender norms. This resulted in stigmatization and rumours about migrant women’s ‘immoral lives’ in Malaysia. Stories written by Bangladeshi men in Malaysia were published in tabloid magazines in Bangladesh. Fear spread throughout the female community and relatives at home questioned the women’s migrations. Disgracing women who are considered to overstep conventional gender roles by taking factory jobs has been conspicuously common in many societies worldwide in the course of history (cf. Massey 1994). It is feared that the power balance between the sexes will be upset and may undermine one’s own position. Gossip is a tool to control women’s actions and is expected to lead to self-regulation.

Another reason why many of the Bangladeshi men resented the presence of Bangladeshi women in Malaysia is related to the bitterness the former felt about their low earnings, their low status and the discrimination they face in Malaysia. While many of the Bangladeshi men and women felt discriminated against and treated disrespectfully by Malaysians, the men were more frequently subjected to verbal abuse and humiliation. Migrant men are often considered more of a threat to the host society than migrant women. The men’s attempts to control ‘their’ women was partly a projection, a tool to preserve their identity in a largely hostile environment. Bangladeshi women’s demeanour and sexuality represented the struggle over the perseverance of traditional values.

Although the Bangladeshi men appreciated certain aspects of Malaysian society, many considered their own Bangladeshi fabric of social norms and traditions to be superior. Nevertheless, the men did adopt certain Malaysian lifestyles. Many Bangladeshi men courted women, most of whom were of Malaysian or Indonesian descent. The men were generally not challenged about or stigmatized for dating. Few men appeared to have qualms about spending large amounts of money on their girlfriends; they referred to their personal and physical needs Gender norms and definitions of masculinity in both Malaysia and Bangladesh acknowledge men’s physical needs. They do not differ much in this respect, despite the fact that courting is not as openly practised or as widespread in Bangladesh. While continuing to value their own background, women appreciated Malaysian lifestyles, gender norms and behaviour in Malaysia more openly than the men did. Living in Malaysia had increased the women’s self-determination and scope of choices and opportunities. Although they suffered hardship – they missed the advice and support of loved ones at home, and worried about money and job security – many women felt that they had acquired
social skills by looking after themselves and finding their way in a new environment, and many took a lot of pride in that.

However, being socioculturally dually embedded also led to contradictions at a personal level (domain of self). At times, newly acquired ways of being and doing clashed with internalized gendered perceptions. This could lead to confusion and inner conflict. The choices they made felt good – but were they good? The issues that troubled the Bangladeshi women were those that are generally questioned in their community, for example was it a ‘good’ decision to work abroad? Does a ‘good’ woman go to the market? Is it okay to wear Malaysian style (non-revealing clothes)? Is it alright to talk to someone of the opposite sex? Did those who criticized them have a point? Did God approve, or would there be spiritual repercussions? These questions evoked inner struggles. Insecurities and unsettled issues on an individual level influenced women’s interactions with other Bangladeshi women in the household and the community domain.

Despite the Bangladeshi women’s appreciation of Malaysian women’s greater degree of self-determination and their own increased social space – which could include friendly interactions with men – they were often critical about the behaviour of other Bangladeshi women. The atmosphere in many of the women’s hostels was tense; although this was partly because of the overcrowded conditions in these places, it was also a result of the mistrust among the women and the accusations that were made. Several dynamics were at play, highlighting women’s sociocultural bifocality. While many women believed in making their own choices as practised in Malaysia, they feared repercussions from their home community and household, and the impact on their lives once they returned to Bangladesh. Being aware of the hegemonic power of the scandalous stories, some chose to join the dominant discourse to articulate their own moral superiority, portraying themselves as different and ‘good’. At other times, gossiping was an expression of frustration and fear of the consequences of how other women’s behaviour might be perceived by the community.

The dominant Bangladeshi moral system was transplanted to Malaysia by men and women alike. Many women suffered from their countrywomen’s tendency to judge them harshly against the hegemonic standards of the home country, yet most women did exactly the same. Bangladeshi migrant women had redefined the conventional definition of purdah to one that reflects a state of mind that entails a level of trust in rather than control over women, with an emphasis on personal responsibility. However, this ‘new’ meaning of purdah – which was often referred to as relating to self – was generally not extended to other Bangladeshi women.

In time, the magazines stopped publishing scandalous stories and the women carved out avenues of their own choice, particularly relating to marriage. As stated, an important aim of many of the women was to improve their marriage prospects. Many of the unmarried and divorced women thought that their earnings abroad would provide a considerable dowry, which would improve their choice of grooms and ease the related negotiations. Since earnings were lower than anticipated and because of the stigmatization of women in Malaysia via magazine stories, many of the women had started to doubt that their marriage prospects would improve. This
mostly concerned those women who earned less (domain of work) and for whom the pressure to send home money was more acute (domestic domain).

Over the years, the Bangladeshi women and men developed friendships. Marrying someone they had befriended in Malaysia and with whom they had shared their day-to-day problems and challenges became an option. While couples adopted the Malaysian custom of dating, it was moulded to fit the Bangladeshi moral framework of reference. Since courting is ‘not done’ in the Bangladeshi context, marriage was discussed early on in the relationships. To marry was important to the vast majority of the young Bangladeshi women: for an ‘honourable’ woman to be with a man, she must be married to him. While marriage is no guarantee that a woman will not be abandoned, it is generally felt to show a man’s commitment and to legitimize the liaison. Getting married was not always as important to the men; they did not risk their social standing by dating.

The largest concern that aspirant couples had was in the domain of the family, that is, getting their parents or other relatives to approve of their marriage. The roughly thirty women we had come to know better over the course of time and who had married or were engaged to Bangladeshi men they had met in Malaysia can be divided into three groups.

The first group comprises the women who had married with the consent of their parents or planned to do so soon. These women (representing just over a third of the total) had respectful, settled relationships and both partners were content. The men in these relationships had adopted a different view of women and gender roles as a result of their stay in Malaysia; they frequently commented on this and their demeanour exemplified the change in them. For the second group (representing less than a third of the total), things were going less smoothly. They were anxious and unsure about their future with the men they were engaged to or had married. Although things had started out well, the men seemed to have become less committed as time had passed. It was unclear whether things would work out after all. The third group of women consisted of about a quarter of the women who were in a relationship. The men who had promised or had actually married them in Malaysia had abandoned them. The women’s grief was profound; love, honour and money had been lost. Some men had been genuine but had not been able to overcome their parents’ objections to a ‘Malaysian’ marriage; other men seemed not to have had serious intentions from the start.

Many of the women in the last two categories had ‘lent’ Bangladeshi men thousands of ringgits to pay for new documents when they changed factories or if they wanted to stay longer in Malaysia; the women had handed over the money for the sake of their relationships. Other men had taken the money they had received back to their families in Bangladesh. The money thus obtained was a lucrative alternative to their meagre wages. The vulnerable position in which the women in the last two groups found themselves exemplifies the power imbalance between the sexes. While many women’s self-confidence and awareness had increased and they felt that a relationship of their own choosing was justified (inspired by Malaysian gender norms), some women’s choices were strongly influenced by fear of being left out and the desire to be a socially respected married woman, even if that meant
paying money (instigated by internalized Bangladeshi gender norms). Ironically, despite the women’s disapproval of dowry payments, which they dismissed as being contrary to ‘love’ and equal partnership, many of them had lent men large amounts of money hoping that it would encourage them to commit themselves to marriage – but it often did not. Insecurity, fear of remaining unmarried and internalized views on marriage and femininity had overruled their sense of self-determination (and better judgement, as some said in retrospect). While some men held notions of equal partnership and treated their wives respectfully, others did not.

To understand the full array of reasons underlying the different relational experiences, it would have been necessary to delve deeper into the field of psychology, which was clearly beyond the scope of this study. However, it can be noted that abandonment and deception happened more frequently to those women who had been divorced before they left for Malaysia, which reflects the generally lower social standing of divorcees. Additionally, those Bangladeshi women whose demeanour and actions displayed a deep belief in their self-worth and their right to equal treatment, who put their dignity and self-determination centre stage, even in challenging times, and who would not allow anybody to ‘mess’ with them, were more likely than other women to have sustainable, fulfilling and respectful relationships. More research is needed to adequately understand the reasons behind the differences in women’s fates.

The findings in this study show that sociocultural bifocality – namely a dual sociocultural outlook and orientation – is particularly relevant for temporary migrants who will return to their native country after their contracts expire. Moreover, bifocality is clearly gendered and should be integrated into any analytical framework that is used in migration studies.

10.3 Post-migration stage: back in Bangladesh

Not many studies focus on return migration. Those that do look at the impact of migration on sending countries generally do so in terms of the potential for national economic development. The importance of the economic and social gains derived from men and women’s migrations for their individual households receives less attention.

The few studies on female migration in Asia that have looked at returned migrant women focused on the empowerment potential of migration. These studies, which were largely based on surveys, show that if a woman comes back economically successful, her social position in the community is likely to improve and that many women want to migrate again (Gamburd 2000; Chantavanich et al. 2001). What has generally received limited attention is how migrant women’s lives evolved after their return home, the ways in which their individual and household situations had changed in the short and the long term, what activities they became engaged in and how this related to their initial aims of migration.

For this study, I visited Bangladeshi migrant women both in Malaysia and after their return to Bangladesh, and this gave me the opportunity to follow up on their
lives. A few returned migrant women who all lived in the same neighbourhood in Dhaka were also included in the study. Logistically and time-wise, it was beyond the scope of this study to visit a sufficient number of returned migrant men to compare their experiences with those of the women. More research is needed in this area.

My research assistants and I revisited a number of migrant women and their families over a period of six years, and found that as their situations changed over time, so did the apparent outcomes or perceived consequences of their migration experiences. What might have appeared to be a ‘negative’ outcome at some point could have turned into a more favourable one, or vice versa. This highlights the fact that one cannot merely speak of ‘the’ migration outcome. As outcomes are often complex and can evolve over time, it is important to conduct longitudinal studies (cf. Mahler and Pessar 2006 and Sinke 2006).

Both economic and social criteria were used to assess the migration outcomes. The amount of money that the women remitted varied and was closely related to each woman’s wage level. As in other studies, we found that remittances were largely spent on daily expenditures and that women had little influence on their allocation while they were still in bidesh. The latter sometimes let to frustration, as some money was found to have been spent unwisely or not in line with the migrants’ ideas.

The topic of ‘money’ is clearly value loaded. The more we talked to returned migrant women and their relatives, the more fluctuations and inconsistencies we encountered in the stories told concerning the amount of savings, the investments made and the losses incurred. Some of these differences were a result of the fact that over the years the women had lost track of the actual expenditures; other differences resulted from the women being too embarrassed to be frank with us, especially if they had lost money. Other women wanted to make a point, and exaggerating or underplaying figures served this purpose. In short, the partial or inconsistent representations had social meaning.

Despite their low earnings and the remittances they had sent, many of the women had managed to save some money, which they allocated to their own choosing. Although we did not always manage to get the exact breakdown of savings and expenditures, we did discern some important trends. Our findings show that the allocation of the money and the decision-making process were often gendered.

The migrant women spent a lot of money on consumer goods and gifts to bring back to Bangladesh; doing so is a matter of prestige and obligation in migrant communities throughout the world. Social pressure had led the migrant men and women alike to spend several months’ wages on TVs, VCRs and other luxury goods – even if there was no electricity in their villages. Later, several of the women said that they regretted spending so much on commodities. While they had been in Malaysia, they had considered the occasional woman who had decided not to bring many gifts and commodities back as ‘selfish’ or ‘stingy’; after their return to Bangladesh, however, they referred to these women as having been ‘smart’.

The most valuable items that women brought back for themselves were gold jewellery, which is of special importance when one desires to marry. In addition to its material value, gold also has social and symbolic value. Owning gold made the
women feel more ‘womanly’; it enhanced and confirmed their femininity and prestige and strengthened their fallback position. Many said that they would never sell it, thus highlighting its symbolic meaning. However, some women did sell their gold when times were hard.

Land is a valuable asset and most of the migrants wanted to buy some upon their return. About a third of the 27 women we met repeatedly after their return to Bangladesh had managed to buy land in their own names and thus strengthen their fallback position. For a few of the women, the land was an income-generating investment (rice production).

Building a house or extending their house had been high on the list of many migrants. Twelve of the women had built a house either on their newly acquired land or on their relatives’ land. There were various reasons for building a house. A few simply wanted to be more comfortable, but for most of the women building a house entailed strategic incentives. For some it was an economic investment and a source of income (rent). In addition to being their home, for women without husbands it was a means to live more independently from their relatives. To some of the women who had married men of their own choosing during or after their migration, building a house on their parents’ land was an investment in socio-economic security: if the marriage were to go wrong, it would make returning to the parental home more legitimate and more secure; after all, the women owned the house. Husbands-to-be had not always been in total agreement with their future wives’ investments; the women, however, saw their husbands’ acceptance of their demands as evidence that they were not marrying them just for money. Their choice and the precautions they had taken were intended to make the balance of power in their spousal relationship more equal. In short, building a house had increased the women’s fallback position.

However, gendered restrictions and resistance were frequently encountered in the process of constructing the houses, on practical as well as more fundamental levels. Dealing with contractors is widely considered to be a male affair. Those women who tried to coordinate the construction themselves often faced challenges. Builders or male relatives tried to profit financially from them or charged them more than the usual price, using their superior socio-economic position. Although almost half of the returned migrant women we met in Bangladesh had managed to build a house, many others who had wished to do so had not succeeded as they had not earned enough money or had lost it as a result of failed investments.

Like most migrants worldwide, the Bangladeshi migrant women had also planned to invest their earnings in lucrative businesses in order to have a sustainable source of income. A little more than a third of the returned women succeeded in this. Those who had arrived in Malaysia several years before the Asian economic crisis had been able to save substantially more than those who had arrived just a year prior to the crisis and were more successful in the businesses they had invested in. These businesses included renting out the rooms or shop spaces they had bought or built, tailoring, rearing poultry or other animals, cultivating the land they had bought, providing public transport (two women had bought rickshaws, and one had bought a bus) and lending money. One woman simply lived off the interest she received on her savings.
Some projects failed and the women lost their money. Several of the projects failed as a result of a lack of skill and expertise, or simply because they were risky endeavours. There is an urgent need for migrants to be given institutionalized assistance regarding investments, as has already been argued (cf. Siddiqui & Abrar 2001; de Bruyn & Kuddus 2005:46). At other times, the women’s endeavours had been hindered by sociocultural norms and gender discrimination. In several cases, relatives or the community openly disapproved of the women’s agency and business ventures. In other cases, brothers, husbands or other men abused their relatively powerful position versus women and sabotaged the latter’s businesses; an example of this is the husband who hijacked his wife’s successful tea stall.

Living in a sociocultural context in which not everyone respects women as equals with individual income-generating aspirations and capacities, poses challenges to women who want to earn their own living. Many relatives felt that they had a natural right to the earnings of ‘their’ women and sometimes verbally abused women for what was perceived to be their ‘selfish’ behaviour. Many of these women felt both socially and emotionally isolated. A few of the women reassessed their initial decisions and gave in to the pressure exerted by their relatives. Nevertheless, the women tried to better their lives and – as we observed by visiting them over the years – perseverance led to improvements in most of their lives as time passed. In their struggles, women implicitly and explicitly renegotiated the meaning of gendered norms on what constitutes appropriate behaviour for women. Boundaries were slowly but steadily stretched and moved.

Apart from the aforementioned allocations of earnings, there is a monetary issue that is rarely mentioned in the literature, namely that money goes missing. There was often a considerable sum of money that had been ‘lost’ or was perceived as ‘wasted’, as the women called it. Some of the missing money was a result of theft or the allocation of remittances by relatives towards ends that the women did not approve of, such as spending it ‘lavishly’ instead of educating the children or buying land. A considerable amount of money was also lost as a result of the ‘loans’ the women had made to their husbands-to-be, often while they were in Malaysia. In cases where the marriage took place and the relationship continued, the investment was soon forgotten and thus not perceived as a ‘loss’. After all, the social goal of marriage had been attained; it had been a beneficial social investment in the eyes of the woman – although her relatives sometimes had a very different opinion. It was found that at least a quarter of the women we met in Bangladesh had lost money by giving it to prospective husbands who then disappeared. The amounts were substantial, namely 50,000–100,000 takas (approximately 1000-2000 euros). These women were left not only unmarried but also socially and economically isolated; their situation was severe.

Other migrant women said that if their wages had been fair and there had not been all the stigmatization, not so many women would have been inclined to try and change their fate by ‘catching’ a man. Although it is indeed very likely that fewer women would have made these kinds of social investments, some of the women who had earned good money had made similar choices. The difference, however, is
that these women could amend this choice, as they had sufficient money left to invest in different ways in order to ensure their future security.

Thus, the women invested their earnings in economic security as well as social security. Economic investments that were geared to improving a woman’s fall-back position and her ability to generate income often brought more benefits than investing in social security, such as potential future husbands. The economic security investments the women made stretched gender boundaries, thereby improving their socio-economic space.

In a society like Bangladesh, however, where women are often dependent on social protection, social investments are very significant. There is a distinct difference between social security investments that are mutually beneficial and frequently entail tangible assets in which women’s ownership is established (e.g. a house), and social security investments that make women more vulnerable, such as investments made in order to ‘catch’ a potential husband. The latter type of social security investment is often instigated by fear that the potential husband will otherwise leave; this fear is rooted in internalized notions of gender roles, inequality and marriage. Conventional gender norms are thus perpetuated. Economic and social goals and aspirations are clearly interlinked. Migrant women’s potential investments in economic and in social security should therefore be included in future frameworks of migration analyses.

Many women’s social goals of migration were in some way related to the marriage institution. Of the 27 women we visited in Bangladesh, two thirds had wanted to marry a man of their own choosing. Almost half of the women we talked with in Bangladesh had managed to attain this goal as a consequence of their migration. Most of these marriages appeared to us to be harmonious and happy, and were accepted by the in-laws. The women were clearly respectful of their in-laws; they were often pious and lived up to the image of a ‘good’ wife and daughter-in-law. In turn, they were respected for the knowledge and life experiences they had gained. A few of the married women who while in Malaysia had felt unsure about the future of their marriages continued to feel uncertain about their husbands’ commitment.

Some of the divorced and widowed women had been resolved not to remarry; for them, migration had been a way to circumvent marriage by becoming economically independent. Four of these women had not remarried, while one of the younger woman had not been able to avoid remarriage. The determination and firmness she had shown by migrating, and that consequently had improved her decision-making power, had however yielded some result. Her marriage had taken place under her conditions: she and her husband were living with her parents.

Several married women had migrated to escape unhappy marriages, conflict and abuse. Those who had consciously striven to become economically independent had fared well, while many of those who had been in a similar marital situation but had defined their migration primarily as ‘getting away’ from it all remained unhappy in

---

1. Four of these women had discussed their relationships with us while they had been in Malaysia. Three of the other women we met in Bangladesh had been hesitant while in bidesh to discuss the matter.
their marriages; fights and even physical abuse continued. They avoided divorce because they feared socio-economic vulnerability; some were also emotionally attached to their husbands. Several contemplated migrating again. Migration, once more, was seen as an escape route.

Many women had been a little anxious about being stigmatized upon their return from bidesh. I found that at least a third of the migrant women had suffered from stigmatization, bad-mouthing and gossip after their return. Mothers were stigmatized for leaving their children behind. Although several mothers had planned to invest their earnings in their children’s future (i.e. to educate them and then marry them off to suitable grooms), few had managed to do so. Not only had their wages been too low, but also during their absence some children had dropped out of school, and some daughters had been married off by relatives without the mothers’ consent. Mothers suffered immensely over the fates of their children, and this often resulted in feelings of guilt and shame. If children were not doing well, it was blamed on the women’s migration. On a more positive note, the returned women shared their newly acquired experiences and insights with their children. Those who were having babies for the first time talked extensively about how they planned to educate their daughters. Further research should investigate the full scope of the impact that migration has on the children of migrant women.

The five unmarried or divorced women who had failed to marry or become economically successful suffered the most from stigmatization. A few had left their villages to look for work in Dhaka. Apart from being in economic distress, they had been socially isolated and felt that they no longer fitted in, and they could not bear the insulting comments made by villagers and relatives. Many were bitter that they were so harshly judged for not having husbands. Finding a job in Dhaka to sustain themselves was a dire need. They still felt that they were ‘between’ the past and a better post-migration future. When we last met these women, they were still frantically looking for jobs.

Other unmarried women who had been more successful in building their lives economically also encountered criticism. This had less to do with having been a migrant woman than with being a woman on their own, doing things differently and implicitly challenging traditional gender roles. These women’s perseverance eventually resulted in more harmonious and respectful relations, even though they did not have husbands.

Although many of the women had experienced stigmatization, equally as many had gained in social standing and prestige not only because of their economic success, but also because of their ‘new’ personality and increased human capital, namely their newly acquired knowledge and experience. They were often referred to by relatives and neighbours as being ‘smart’ and having ‘knowledge’. Women combined these assets with a deliberately pious demeanour, which had a positive effect on their marriages and their position in the household.

On a personal level, many of the women felt that they had learned a lot through their migration experience and had gained new social skills. They were more self-confident and took pride in their achievements. In combination with their economic assets, this had a positive impact on the power balance within their marriage. A
couple of the women whose migrations had not led to the desired result cherished their personal gains in social skills and knowledge and hoped to use these for their future benefit.

Many women desired to remain economically active in order not only to improve their economic situation but also to engage in activities in which they take pride. After settling down again in Bangladesh, almost two thirds of the women became engaged in some income generating activity; for almost a third this was a necessity. Four of the women would have liked to engage in an income generating activity, but their husbands or relatives did not approve. As many as a third of the returned women we talked to seriously considered migrating again and doing things differently this time, especially where the allocation of their earnings was concerned. Yet, as far as I know this desire did not materialize for any of them. The lack of resources, the unwillingness of relatives to assist them financially, the lack of reliable agents and of affordable visas and work permits for respectable jobs were important reasons for this. They and the many women we encountered in Dhaka and surrounding areas who desired to migrate in order to improve their lives would greatly benefit from migration schemes supported by the government and under the protection of national and international laws. For some, however, migration became a concept, a dream of escaping; it was something to ease their day-to-day suffering, but not something to be endorsed – because essentially they wanted to remain in Bangladesh.

In sum, the migration of Bangladeshi women is driven by both economic and social goals, and these goals are often interlinked. Many strive to gain economically in order to increase their social standing by either improving their marriage prospects or being able to live dignified lives without husbands. In their attempts to do so, they encounter various obstacles of economic and sociocultural origin.

On an economic level, three types of obstacles can be identified: a) the migrant institution and the exorbitant migration fees, which were sometimes lost; b) the level of wages while abroad, which were low because of the ‘migrant labour regime’ in Malaysia and the consequences of the Asian financial crisis, which reinforced the workings of the ‘migrant labour regime’; this resulted in wages that were significantly lower than had been promised and stipulated in their contracts; and c) a lack of business expertise and assistance in Bangladesh, which resulted in the failure of projects or in investments in risky business endeavours, such as relatives’ migrations.

On a sociocultural level, obstacles can be divided into external challenges (the domestic and community domains) and internal challenges (the domain of self). As for the former, women faced opposition for stretching – or as it was perceived by opponents, transgressing – gender boundaries by being economically active and powerful. Male relatives and other men often tried to obtain access to women’s earnings by exercising their relatively greater sociocultural power. Other means of attempting to rectify hegemonic gender roles and power relations included both verbal and physical abuse. The pressure of hegemonic notions of marriage, and the concomitant negative connotation and low social prestige of ‘being without a husband’, was a major challenge to many of the returned women.
On an individual level, several women were challenged by pursuing the individual socio-economic goals to which they felt entitled (sometimes strengthened by their sociocultural bifocal experience in Malaysia) while being infused by internalized conventional gender notions of marriage, which sometimes resulted in social security investments that were not beneficial. As for the outcomes of migration, economic gain and success was most tangible in terms of such assets as land, houses, gold and sustainable business investments. The women who had failed economically were clearly most prone to stigmatization and social exclusion. For them, migration had not yielded the envisioned results; instead, many faced a situation that was economically and socially severe.

Social gains were made in three interrelated areas: in the realm of marriage (some of the women now have a good marriage), in terms of social standing within the domestic and the community domain (irrespective of their marital status) and in the realm of social gains, as experienced on the level of self.

As studies on female migration have highlighted, the multiple facets and complex nature of women’s positions and situations preclude unidimensional conclusions concerning the possible gains and losses resulting from migration (Anthias 2000:37; Mahler & Pessar 2001:455; Morokvasic 1984:893, 2003:128; Mahler & Pessar 2006). ‘Yes/No’ questions concerning emancipation are prone to evoke a flat analysis and discussions that centre on dichotomies, such as empowerment versus disempowerment or gains versus losses. They leave little room for the many grey areas and ambiguities within an individual migrant’s complex lived reality. By looking at individual women’s experiences, this study aimed to account for these grey areas and potential contradictory experiences. The consequences of women’s migration were obviously not unequivocally positive, yet about two thirds of the women we visited in Bangladesh had somehow managed to enlarge their social, economic and personal space through their migration experiences. While this proportion is not representative of all migrant women, the analysis of their experiences highlights important gender dynamics.

10.4 Towards a new analytical model

As this study has shown, to thoroughly understand the migration incentives, experiences and consequences of temporary migrant women and men, any analytical framework should incorporate the aspects that are summarized below. It is the very connection between, the interface of agency and structure that helps to reveal migration dynamics and experiences. To discern this interface for analytical purposes, it is instructive to look at migrant’s individual experiences and to distinguish four relevant domains, namely that of self (the individual level), the domestic domain (the household), the domain of work and that of community (see model 10.1). This study has shown that migration is not a gender-neutral process in which men and women have similar motivations and migration experiences or experience sociocultural dual embeddedness similarly.
The findings thus highlight the importance of incorporating gender in migration theory and integrating it in any analyses. Since gender does not constitute a separate system but pervades all levels of society, to engender migration theory a gendered lens needs to be built into all levels of analyses. Moreover, if we wish to fully understand migrants’ experiences, both migrant men and migrant women should be incorporated in migration studies.

This study has also shown that gender relations are not fixed, clearly demarcated or unambiguous. Therefore, any analytical framework should approach gender as the dynamic variable that it is. Gender notions and definitions vary not only over time and space but also among individuals. Our findings also highlight the fact that temporary migration calls for an analytical framework that incorporates at least all three stages of the migration cycle. Of particular relevance to temporary migration is the sociocultural bifocality of migrants and the impact this has on their decisions, actions and perceptions in both the sending and the home country.

Figure 10.1: Understanding the migration process

- Macro context
- Pre-migration stage
- Migration stage
- Post-migration stage

*Migration goals and aim
*Socio-economic consequences
*Impact on gender notions and roles

Domain of self    Domestic domain    Community domain    Work domain

Interactions and negotiations within and between the domains

The fact that the women had managed to migrate in their own right reflects a redefinition of gender norms and roles. Women’s migration clearly evokes controversies. Their dual sociocultural embeddedness (their bifocal orientation while in Malaysia)
led to new or enhanced perceptions of definitions of femininity. Yet there are no clear-cut statements to be made concerning the emancipatory or gender-equality enhancing potential that migration may have. Analytical frameworks should therefore allow for grey areas and seemingly contradictory findings, which ultimately reveal the determining dynamics. To this end, both social and economic aspects – that is, the incentives, aspirations and outcomes – should be incorporated and investigated, and the level of agency as well as that of structure should be recognized as equally important in defining migrant’s experiences and situations.

On a structural level, it is important to understand the underlying factors that contribute to the migration system. These are economic, political and sociocultural factors that are related to the sending and the receiving country as well as the global arena, which informs migration streams and the formation of migrant institutions. On the level of the receiving country, it is important to understand the prevalent migrant labour regime, both in itself and in relation to other prevalent labour regimes. The hiring of temporary migrant workers has increased as a result of international competition and the search for ever increasing profits and decreasing costs for sharply priced commodities as favoured by consumers in industrialized countries.

Because of their weak legal status, which allows employers to reduce their labour costs, temporary migrant workers are particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. There is no doubt that globalization, which creates the opportunity to migrate, is flawed by the lack of legal protection and law enforcement on the national level of migrant sending and receiving countries, as well as the international level, namely in relation to UN conventions and their ratification and enforcement.

Having said this, however, it is equally important to acknowledge factors of individual agency as it is to recognize the limitations imposed by structural forces. As this study has shown, individual incentives and contextualized experiences influence migration decisions and experiences; structural forces intermingle with personal desires, culminating in migration. Individuals are engaged in a complex of activities that are embedded within while simultaneously transforming practices of globalization. Hence, migration is both a cause and a consequence of that process. In other words, apart from understanding the underlying systems and structures, it is instructive to look at migrants’ personal experiences. Although adverse structural conditions had impacted the women’s migration outcome (i.e. the amount of money they had been able to remit or save) and left some of them bereft and in dire need, others had nonetheless gained both economically and socially from their migrations.

This finding does not downplay the unjust work and payment conditions, or the urgent need for improvements in this realm that governments, employers, recruitment agents, consumers and others actors should be calling for. It does, however, promote the acknowledgement and exploration of the actual experiences and lived realities of migrants and returnees who try to negotiate the contradictions and the adverse conditions that they experience. While often subject to unfair conditions, they are more than mere victims: their choices and efforts deserve due recognition. Moreover, a person’s agency should be assessed from within his or her own context. It is therefore important for researchers to listen to the stories and perceptions of the migrants before interpreting their lives from their own points of reference and ideo-
logies. Agency can also include actions that are intended to improve the well-being of others, respect social and moral norms, or fulfil personal commitments. The full array of factors that influence how a migrant acts and reacts (or chooses not to), and his or her motives for doing so, can become apparent only by considering the migrant’s agency in a broad sense.

This study started with the words of Kofi Anan, namely: ‘Migration is a courageous expression of an individual’s will to overcome adversity and live a better life.’ Many people throughout the world are engaged in this adventure. I hope that by drawing attention to their lives and their life stories, this study will make a contribution – however small – to improving their fates.
REFERENCES


References


Beesey, Allan (2001) Return and reintegration: Female Migrants from Yunnan to Thailand. In Supang Chantavanich, Christina Wille and Basia Passl (eds), Female Labour Migration in South-East Asia: Change and Continuity. Case studies of Indonesia Philippines, Thailand and Yunnan (China) (pp. 135-170). Bangkok: Asian Research Centre for Migration (ARCM).


References


References


References


References


Kassim, Azizah (2001a) Integration of foreign workers and illegal employment in Malaysia’. In OECD. International Migration in Asia, trends and Policies (pp 113- 138), OECD, Japan Institute of Labour.


References


References


Sukamdi (2001) Country study Indonesia. In Supang Chantavanich, Christina Wille and Basia Passi (eds), Female Labour Migration in South-East Asia: Change and Continuity. Case studies of Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Yunnan (China) (pp. 94-134). Bangkok: Asian Research Centre for Migration (ARCM).


References


Wille, Christina (2001) Literature and Debates on Women’s International Labour Migration. In Supang Chantavanich, Christina Wille and Basia Passl (eds), Female Labour Migration in South-East Asia: Change and Continuity. Case studies of Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and Yunnan (China) (pp. 11-19.) Bangkok: Asian Research Centre for Migration (ARCM).


Additional references
Although it is commonly believed that international migration largely concerns people migrating from ‘poor’ countries in the southern hemisphere to ‘rich’ countries in the northern Hemisphere, South to South migration is almost as voluminous. Asia (including the Middle East) is a case in point: it hosts about one third of all international migrants.

This study focuses on the migration experiences of Bangladeshi women who temporarily moved to Malaysia to work in labour-intensive factories. Although the scope of labour migration and the relevant immigration policies may differ from country to country, labour migration within Asia is characterized by several salient commonalities: documented labour is virtually always temporary and strictly regulated, most of it is South to South migration and there is a feminization of migration. The relevance of this study is related to the aforementioned communalities.

In migration discussions, the focus is generally on South to North migration. This is reflected in the migration literature. Studies generally concentrate on permanent migration and on issues related to border control and integration into the host country. There is, however, a fundamental difference between the permanent or settlement migration that is prominent in Europe and North America, and the temporary or circular migration as currently witnessed in Asian and Middle Eastern countries, where migrant workers cannot obtain citizenship. These differences are generally not acknowledged in theoretical discourses on migration. This study fills this gap in our understanding by focusing on temporary migration processes, which are equally or sometimes even more important in terms of volume and contributions to countries of origin.

Although women now make up a numerical majority in many cross-border flows, including those in Asia, research on international migration has overwhelmingly focused on men. While an increasing number of migration scholars now insist that migration is a gendered phenomenon that requires more sophisticated theoretical and analytical tools, there has been little concerted effort to integrate gender into theories of international migration theory.

This study integrates gender relations into the conceptual and analytical framework. The study focuses on why Bangladeshi women migrated and how their experiences impacted their lives during their migration and after their return. The fieldwork was carried out in both Malaysia and Bangladesh and covered the pre-migration phase, the migration phase and the post-migration phase. In order to better understand the gender dynamics involved, the experiences of Bangladeshi migrant men are incorporated whenever relevant and possible.
While many migration scholars argue that women’s migrations are largely sacrificial (the women migrate because they feel responsible for their families), others have shown that many women migrate to escape constraining or abusive situations and to better their lives. There are no universal or clear-cut answers as to why women migrate. Individuals’ motivations differ, as do their social contexts. This study shows that structural and individual reasons for migration intersect in complex ways. The economic situation of Bangladesh (i.e. economic deprivation and high rates of unemployment) and gendered labour relations were important incentives for migration for most of the women with whom we spoke. Within this structural context, individual motivations and incentives played major roles. During the survey and initial interviews, many women stated that the main reason for their migration had been economic and was primarily related to helping their family. However, the numerous informal discussions we had during the study made it clear that the actual situation was very often rather different and more complex. For many a woman, stating that she had migrated for the economic benefit of the family was largely a safe and socially correct answer. As the women’s confidence in the researchers increased and they felt more at ease within the Bangladeshi Malaysian community, different stories were told; these revealed that while some women had migrated primarily for the benefit of others, most also had reasons of their own. Many women were individually motivated to overcome gender impasses (most of which were related to the marriage institution) in order to enlarge their own social and economic space. Hence, their migrations were not mere reflections of gender oppression but often also a result of their determination to improve their lives. It is the very connection between, the interface of, agency and structure that helps to reveal migration dynamics and experiences.

As studies on transnationalism have shown, migrants often retain a ‘dual frame of reference’, a dual orientation towards the ‘here’ (the host country) and the ‘there’ (the country of origin). Gender roles, values and norms often differ in the receiving country from those in the home country. Concomitant adaptations are not always welcomed by all. Within the realm of the Bangladeshi community in Malaysia, the Bangladeshi men largely regarded their countrywomen’s migration to Malaysia as a violation of appropriate gender norms. This resulted in stigmatization and in rumours about migrant women’s ‘immoral lives’ in Malaysia. Fear spread throughout the female community and relatives at home questioned the women’s migrations.

Living in Malaysia had increased the women’s self-determination and scope of choices and opportunities. However, being socioculturally dually embedded also led to contradictions at a personal level (domain of self). At times, newly acquired ways of being and doing clashed with internalized gendered perceptions. This could lead to confusion and inner conflict. While many women believed in making their own choices as practised in Malaysia, they feared repercussions from their home community and household, and the impact on their lives once they returned to Bangladesh. Being aware of the hegemonic power of the scandalous stories, some chose to join the dominant discourse to articulate their own moral superiority, portraying themsel-
ves as different and ‘good’ as opposed to other ‘bad’ women. Nevertheless, the fact that the women had managed to migrate in their own right reflects a redefinition of gender norms and roles. Women’s migration clearly evokes controversies. Moreover, their dual sociocultural embeddedness (their bifocal orientation while in Malaysia) led to new or enhanced perceptions of definitions of femininity.

The migration of Bangladeshi women is driven by both economic and social goals, and the goals are often interlinked. Many strive to gain economically in order to increase their social standing by either improving their marriage prospects or being able to live dignified lives without husbands. In their attempts to do so, they encounter various obstacles of economic and sociocultural origin both while they are abroad and after their return to Bangladesh.

On an economic level, three types of obstacles can be identified: a) the migrant institution and the exorbitant migration fees, which were sometimes lost; b) the level of wages while abroad, which were low because of the ‘migrant labour regime’ in Malaysia, the Asian financial crisis, and the lack of adequate policies and law enforcement to protect the rights of migrant workers and to ensure equal treatment; this resulted in wages that were significantly lower than had been promised and stipulated in their contracts; and c) a lack of business expertise and assistance in Bangladesh to returned migrants, which resulted in the failure of projects or in investments in risky business endeavours, such as relatives’ migrations.

On a sociocultural level, obstacles can be divided into external challenges (the domestic and community domains) and internal challenges (the domain of self). As for the former, women faced opposition for stretching – or, as it was perceived by opponents, transgressing – gender boundaries by being economically active and powerful. Male relatives and other men often tried to obtain access to women’s earnings by exercising their relatively greater sociocultural power. Other means of attempting to rectify hegemonic gender roles and power relations included both verbal and physical abuse. The pressure of hegemonic notions of marriage, and the concomitant negative connotation and low social prestige of ‘being without a husband’, was a major challenge to many of the returned women.

On an individual level, several women were challenged by pursuing the individual socio-economic goals to which they felt entitled (sometimes strengthened by their sociocultural bifocal experience in Malaysia) while being infused by internalized conventional gender notions of marriage, which sometimes resulted in social security investments that were not beneficial. As for the outcomes of migration, economic gain and success was most tangible in terms of such assets as land, houses, gold and sustainable business investments. The women who had failed economically were clearly most prone to stigmatization and social exclusion. For them, migration had not yielded the envisioned results; instead, many faced severe economic and social problems.
Social gains were made in three interrelated areas: in the realm of marriage (some of 
the women now have a good marriage), in terms of social standing within the domes-
tic and the community domain (irrespective of their marital status), and in the realm 
of social gains, as experienced on the level of self.

The findings of the study highlight the importance of incorporating gender in migra-
tion theory and integrating it in any analyses. Since gender does not constitute a 
separate system but pervades all levels of society, a gendered lens needs to be built 
into all levels of analyses in order to engender migration theory. Moreover, if we 
wish to fully understand migrants’ experiences, both migrant men and migrant 
women should be incorporated in migration studies.

This study has also shown that gender relations are not fixed, clearly demarcated or 
unambiguous. Therefore, any analytical framework should approach gender as the 
dynamic variable that it is. Gender notions and definitions vary not only over time 
and space but also among individuals. The findings also highlight the fact that tem-
porary migration calls for an analytical framework that incorporates all three stages 
of the migration cycle. Of particular relevance to temporary migration is the socio-
cultural bifocality of migrants and the impact this has on their decisions, actions and 
perceptions in both the sending and the home countries.

The multiple facets and complex nature of women’s positions and situations pre-
clude unidimensional conclusions concerning the possible gains and losses resulting 
from migration. ‘Yes/No’ questions concerning emancipation are prone to evoke a 
flat analysis and discussions that centre on dichotomies, such as empowerment 
versus disempowerment or gains versus losses. They leave little room for the many 
grey areas and ambiguities within an individual migrant’s complex lived reality. By 
looking at the experiences of individual women, this study aimed to account for 
these grey areas and potentially contradictory experiences. The consequences of 
women’s migration were obviously not unequivocally positive, yet about two thirds 
of the women we visited in Bangladesh had somehow managed to enlarge their 
social, economic and personal space through their migration experiences. While 
this proportion is not representative of all migrant women, the analysis of their ex-
periences highlights important gender dynamics.
SAMENVATTING

Over het algemeen veronderstelt men dat internationale migratie grotendeels gaat om mensen die van ‘arme’ landen in de zuidelijke hemisfeer naar ‘rijke’ landen in de noordelijke hemisfeer migreren. Migratie tussen landen in het Zuiden is echter bijna even omvangrijk. Azië (met inbegrip van het Midden-Oosten) is een sprekend voorbeeld: ongeveer één derde van alle internationale migranten bevindt zich in dit werelddeel. Hoewel de aard van arbeidsmigratie en relevante nationale migratiewetgeving van land tot land verschillen, kenmerkt arbeidsmigratie binnen Azië zich door enkele sterke overeenkomsten: gedocumenteerde arbeid is vrijwel altijd tijdelijk en sterk gereguleerd; verreweg de meeste migratie vindt binnen Azië plaats; en migratiestromen zijn ‘vervrouwelijkt’ (het aantal vrouwen dat migreert is vaak groter dan het aantal mannen). Een goed voorbeeld vormen de vrouwen uit Bangladesh die in de negentiger jaren tijdelijk naar Maleisië migreerden om daar in arbeidsintensieve fabrieken te werken. Deze studie richt zich op hun migratie-ervaringen.

Ook in discussies en literatuur over internationale migratie ligt de nadruk over het algemeen op migratie vanuit het Zuiden naar het Noorden. Studies richten zich over het algemeen op permanente migratie en op kwesties met betrekking tot grenscontrole en integratie in het gastland. Er is echter een fundamenteel verschil tussen de permanente of vestigingsmigratie zoals Europa en Noord-Amerika deze kennen, en tijdelijke migratie die zo kenmerkend is voor Aziatische landen en het Midden-Oosten, waar migrerende arbeiders geen burgerschap kunnen verkrijgen en na het beëindigen van hun meerjarige contract (vaak 2-6 jaar) het land moeten verlaten. Deze verschillen ontbreken veelal in de theoretische verhandelingen over migratie. De bevindingen van deze studie tonen het belang aan van aandacht voor tijdelijke migratie en de noodzakelijkheid van meer theoretische kennis over dit fenomeen.

Hoewel vrouwen tegenwoordig de meerderheid vormen in veel grensoverschrijdende migratiestromen, met inbegrip van Azië, richt onderzoek zich nochtans vaak op mannen of maakt geen onderscheid tussen de ervaringen van mannelijke en vrouwelijke migranten. Een stijgend aantal wetenschappers erkent dat migratie een ‘gendered’ fenomeen is. Dit wil zeggen dat mannen en vrouwen mogelijk andere migratie-ervaringen hebben gezien de verschillende sociale posities die zij innemen en de verschillende sociale verwachtingen die aan hen gesteld worden. Dit gegeven is echter zelden opgenomen in de analytische kaders van migratiestudies. Er is tot nog toe weinig inspanning verricht om gender te integreren in theorieën over internationale migratie.

Deze studie richt zich op de vraag waarom vrouwen uit Bangladesh naar Maleisië migreerden en hoe de migratie-ervaringen hun leven tijdens migratie en na terugkeer beïnvloedden. Gender is in het analytische kader van de studie geïntegreerd. De bevindingen maken het belang van deze integratie zichtbaar. Om de rol van gender
beter te begrijpen werden, waar mogelijk en relevant, de ervaringen van vrouwelijke migranten vergeleken met die van mannelijke migranten uit Bangladesh.

Het veldwerk werd zowel in Maleisië als Bangladesh uitgevoerd en behandelde de pre-migratiefase, de migratiefase en de post-migratiefase; vrouwen werden veelvuldig bezocht terwijl ze in het buitenland waren, en na hun terugkomst in Bangladesh. Terwijl (feministische) wetenschappers vaak redeneren dat migratie door vrouwen grotendeels altruïstisch van aard is en vrouwen migreren omdat zij zich verantwoordelijk voelen voor hun families, hebben anderen aangetoond dat veel vrouwen migreren om aan beperkende of onderdrukte situaties te ontsnappen en zo een beter leven na te streven. Uiteraard is het onmogelijk om universele of een eenduidige migratiereden voor vrouwen aan te geven. De motivatie verschilt per individu, net als hun persoonlijke situaties. Deze studie toont aan dat de structurele en individuele redenen voor migratie nauw verweven zijn. De slechte economische situatie in Bangladesh (met hoge werkloosheid) en de algemene achtergestelde positie van vrouwen in de Bengaalse samenleving, vormden een belangrijke aanleiding voor migratie voor de meeste vrouwen met wie wij spraken. Binnen deze structurele context speelden individuele motivaties een belangrijke rol. Bij aanvang van het onderzoek verklaarden veel vrouwen dat zij vooral om economische motieven migreerden dat zij hiermee hun familie wilden helpen. Tijdens de talrijke informele gesprekken die wij met hen voerden in de maanden hierna, werd echter duidelijk dat de situatie meestal anders en complexer was en dat de vrouwen vooral een sociaal wenselijk en dus ‘veilig’ antwoord hadden gegeven op de vraag naar motieven om te migreren. Toen in de loop der tijd het vertrouwen van de vrouwen in de onderzoekers steeg maakten zij hen deelgenoot van andere verhalen uit hun leven. Terwijl enige vrouwen inderdaad hoofdzakelijk gemigreerd waren om hun familie financieel bij te kunnen staan, werd duidelijk dat velen tevens redenen van persoonlijke aard hadden voor hun migratie.

Veel vrouwen streefden ernaar om zich te onttostelen aan sociale beperkingen. Deze hadden meestal betrekking op hun huwelijksstaat en de sociale verwachtingen die de Bengaalse samenleving over het algemeen aan een vrouw stelt. Hun migraties vloeiden dus niet simpelweg voort uit gender ongelijkheid (de maatschappelijke ongelijkheid tussen mannen en vrouwen) maar waren vaak juist ook een weerspiegeling van hun vastberadenheid om hun omstandigheden en positie te verbeteren. De redenen voor migratie van Bengaalse vrouwen waren dus van zowel economische als sociale aard, en meestal nauw met elkaar verweven. Velen streefden ernaar om economisch succesvol te zijn om zodoende hun sociale positie te verbeteren. Degenen die geen gelukkig huwelijk of geen man hadden, wilden hun huwelijksvooruitzichten verbeteren, of de mogelijkheid vergroten om een goed leven te leiden zonder de financiële en sociale steun van een echtgenoot. In dit streven onder-
vonden zij verschillende hindernissen van economische en sociaal-culturele oorsprong.


Terwijl het verblijf in Maleisië de zelfbeschikking van vrouwen – de mogelijkheid tot het maken van eigen keuzes – vergroot had, leidde het leven in en tussen twee culturen echter ook tot tegenstrijdigheden op persoonlijk vlak. Soms leidden de nieuwe levenswijzen tot innerlijk conflict. Terwijl veel vrouwen geloofden in het maken van eigen keuzes en een grotere bewegingsvrijheid zoals gangbaar in Maleisië, vreesden zij eventuele repercussies op het moment van terugkeer naar Bangladesh. Men was zich zeer bewust van de heersende zienswijze op vrouwelijke migranten. Verscheidene vrouwen kozen ervoor om deze ideeën te onderschrijven door zichzelf als 'goede' vrouwen te presenteren in tegenstelling tot andere 'slechte' vrouwen. Dit leidde soms tot wantrouwen en strijd tussen vrouwen onderling.

De migratie van vrouwen leidde duidelijk tot controversen. Desalniettemin wijst hun migratie op een herdefiniëring van gender normen en rollen. Het feit dat zij sociaal-cultureel in twee culturen ingebed waren, en in Maleisië blootgesteld waren aan andere normen, waarden en levenswijzen leidde tot nieuwe zienswijzen en percepties van de rol van vrouwen en dus ook van henzelf.

Op economisch gebied ondervonden vrouwen tijdens en na hun migratie drie types van hindernissen: a) de vaak onbetrouwbare wijze waarop migratiecontracten tot stand kwamen en de hoge bedragen die hiermee gepaard gingen; b) de ontvangen lonen in Maleisië welke lager waren dan verwacht en vastgelegd in menig contract. Dit had deels te maken met de Aziatische financiële crisis die indertijd plaatsvond, en deels met het gebrek aan adequaat beleid en wetshandhaving om de rechten van arbeidsmigranten te garanderen; en c) een gebrek aan deskundigheid van en hulp aan teruggekeerde migranten in Bangladesh. Dit resulteerde in investeringen bij het opzetten van bedrijfjes die niet rendabel bleken te zijn.
Sociaal-cultureel gezien ondervonden veel vrouwen oppositie bij het oprekken van hun grenzen – of, zoals hun opponenten het zagen, voor het overschrijden van grenzen van sociaal toelaatbaar gedrag voor vrouwen. Mannelijke verwanten probeerden vaak zeggenschap over de inkomens van vrouwen te verkrijgen, of zich hun geld toe te eigenen. Soms werd niet alleen mondeling maar ook fysiek geweld gebruikt om het traditionele evenwicht en de machtsrelaties tussen vrouwen en mannen te herstellen. De sociale druk op vrouwen om te trouwen en de samenhangende negatieve connotatie en lage sociale positie gepaard gaande met het niet hebben van een echtgenoot, trokken een zware wissel op veel van de teruggekeerde vrouwen.

Wat betreft de financiële resultaten van migratie kan gesteld worden dat er vaak gespaard kon worden, ook al verdienden veel migranten minder dan verwacht en waar zij recht op hadden. Investeringen werden gedaan in land, huizen, goud en soms in duurzame bronnen van inkomsten. Vaak, maar niet altijd, leidde economisch succes tot een verbetering op sociaal-cultureel gebied: een huwelijk naar wens werd gesloten of gecontinueerd, prestige en sociale positie binnen de familie, het huishouden en de gemeenschap werd verbeterd, en op persoonlijk vlak ondervonden vrouwen meer zelfvertrouwen door een toename van vaardigheden en ervaringen.

Er waren echter ook vrouwen die economisch en naar eigen zeggen ook sociaal hadden gefaald. Zij hadden weinig verdiend of hadden hun geld verloren in onrendabele investeringen of aan mannen die hen beloofd hadden hen te trouwen maar vertrokken bleken. Zij waren het meest kwetsbaar voor stigmatisering en sociale uitsluiting. Voor hen had migratie niet de gewenste resultaten opgeleverd, integendeel, hun positie was verslechterd.

De bevindingen van deze studie benadrukken het belang om de rol van gender in de analyse van migratie studies en theorieën te integreren.

De complexe realiteit in het leven van deze vrouwen sluit ééndimensionale conclusies over opbrengsten en verliezen ten gevolge van migratie uit. Het is wenselijk nog mogelijk de vraag of de positie van vrouwen verbeterd is met ja of nee te beantwoorden. Dit biedt te weinig ruimte voor de vele grijsgebieden en tegenstrijdigheden in de levens van migranten. Door stil te staan bij de individuele ervaringen van vrouwelijke migranten tracht deze studie deze grijsgebieden te belichten. De migratie-ervaringen van deze vrouwen waren duidelijk niet altijd positief. Toch slaagde ongeveer tweederde van de vrouwen die wij in Bangladesh na hun terugkeer bezochten, er in om hun sociale, economische en of persoonlijke bewegingsruimte te verbeteren.