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

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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.

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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

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2. Habitus refers to a set of neither wholly conscious nor wholly unconscious perceptions, outlooks and points of reference that guide personal goals and social interactions (Bourdieu 1990; Vertovec 2003:9).
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 fulfill 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 & Grieco 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 confines (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 confines 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-Koob 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-

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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 vario-

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 migra-
tion 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 mul-
tidirectional. The main focus lies on the economic, sociocultural and political trans-
national 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 inhe-
rent part of the lives of those involved. 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 assess-
ments regarding the possibilities and potential benefits of their own or a family
member’s actual mobility (Vertovec 1999; Boyle 2002:1; Guarnizo 1998:52; Verto-
vec 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 deci-
sions 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 hou-
sehold 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 in-
cludes 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

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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. 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.

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

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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.
The pre-migration stage

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’ (Schuller 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

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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 (Espin 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 habituation, 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 habi-

… 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 socio-
cultural 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, pat-
terns of cross-border exchange and relationship among migrants may contribute sig-
nificantly to broadening, deepening or intensifying conjoined processes of transfor-
mation that are already ongoing (Vertovec 2004:972).

While an increasing number of scholars of transnationalism have adopted a gen-
dered perspective, gender has largely remained a blind spot in theorizing transnatio-
nalism (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 (Espin 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.