Working gendered boundaries: temporary migration experiences of Bangladeshi women in the Malaysian export industry from a multi-sited perspective
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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>
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<td>39 women 12 men 43 women 13 men 5 returned women</td>
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<tr>
<td>Malaysia II – 2000</td>
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<td>27 returned women 4 returned men 7 returned women</td>
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<td>Bangladesh I – 1999</td>
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<td>Bangladesh IV – 2006/7</td>
<td>11 returned migrant women</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.

Table 4.1: Fieldwork structuring

Rapidly gaining economic importance as its export manufacturing sector grew (See map in section 3.7).

I decided for two reasons to focus on Bangladeshi women who were working in export manufacturing factories in either Penang or Kedah. First, it would create opportunities to include more factories and women in the study, thus creating a larger and more diversified sample. Second, researching Bangladeshi communities in two different locations would provide insight into potential geographic differences.
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, 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.
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-
Methods. 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 ethnographic 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 (INSTRAW 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.
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 down-playing 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 questions. 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 believed 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. Although 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 withdrawal 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 researchers 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 inventively employed power on other levels. While in some initial interviews I felt confronted by the delicacy of the occasion and the responsibility I had as a researcher, subsequent 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 important 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 understand 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 socio-cultural 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:

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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 Youssof, 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
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.