CHAPTER 6: FROM DESIRE TO DECISION AND DEPARTURE

This chapter takes a closer look at how the migrants materialized their decision to migrate. As seen in the previous chapter, a quarter of all the men were found to have migrated at the request of their fathers or older brothers. The other men chose to migrate as a way to escape a perceived dead-end future. Within a context in which male migration is generally glorified as a way to economic success, it is hardly surprising that these men obtained the consent of their families relatively easily. Their concerns are mostly about obtaining work permits and visas from legitimate agents.

In contrast, for many of the Bangladeshi women, migrating depended primarily not on activating social networks – a concept upon which many pre-migration analyses focus – but on obtaining the necessary familial consent.

6.1 Decision-making processes of female migrants and gendered constraints

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6.2 Decisions, strategies and resources

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mutual agreement

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

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

Consent obtained smoothly

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

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

**Convincing an ally**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rokeya:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6.3 Tapping into the migrant institution

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Money

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

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

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

Table 6.2: Primary means by which the fee was financed

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

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

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

Table 6.3: Primary sources of financing fee (extended)

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

*An interest rate of 10% was common.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

7. Getting a passport cost 1500-5000 takas, depending on whether a middlemen was brought in and
on how soon the travel document was needed. The training in sewing included room and board and cost
10,000 takas. Several women had followed the training.
fixed rates for middlemen and agents, and the differences reflect the arbitrariness of fees charged.

There was little logic to it, except that women who came from faraway villages and had relied more on the dalal had sometimes paid more. For men fees differed as well, the correlation between the time they arrived in Malaysia and the amount they paid to the agent was however weaker.8

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Time

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

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

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

6.4 Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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try to reduce the risk by going to those they already know and who are therefore less likely to disappear with their money. Although several had been deceived initially, many women and men said they trusted their agents and the information provided. How this worked out once the migrants were in Malaysia is the subject of the following chapter.