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

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

Many women remarked that it had taken them quite some time, about a year, to acclimatize to their new environments and lives. In the beginning, everything had been new and unfamiliar; anxiety and tension had prevailed. The water had a ‘smell’¹ and the food tasted strange. Communication was a major problem: they did not speak the local Malay language and only a few knew any English. Their managers and supervisors tried to communicate via Bangladeshi workers who had arrived earlier; however, this did not allay all the apprehension or dispel all the confusion.

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

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

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

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

Negotiating gender norms and roles remained an ongoing process for most women throughout their stay in Malaysia. While being in bidesh brought welcome opportunities, it also brought inner conflict and fear of repercussions. As many of the relevant topics in this chapter are socioculturally charged or sensitive, many women were not comfortable speaking openly about them. The women were often careful in how they represented themselves.2

8.1 Malaysia and Bangladesh: differences in gender roles

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

Generally speaking, Malaysian women take part in public life more actively than do Bangladeshi women. While Bangladeshi women have started to work outside their homes only recently, Malaysian women have historically been engaged in other, non-domestic work, such as working in the fields (e.g. harvesting) and selling their produce in the market (Ng 1999:35). Like the Bangladeshi women, the first generation of Malay women to work in factories during the 1970s and 1980s were also stigmatized for having low morals and taking on Western lifestyles (Arrifin 1984:253; Daud 1985; Ong 1987; Buang 1993). Nowadays, however, factory work for women is largely socially acceptable.3 While concerns about the moral conduct of Malaysian youth remain an issue of public concern, factory women are no longer

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Self-sufficiency and self-determination are key aspects that were often raised when reflecting on what appealed to them in Malaysia. Moreover, Malaysian men and women ‘minded their own business’. A woman’s every step was not followed and criticized. Some women also said that Malaysian women are allowed to choose the men they want to be with and that they have the right to break off relationships.

Approving of gender norms – particularly those regarding women’s employment and a larger say regarding their marriage – does not imply that the Bangladeshi women liked everything about Malaysia. Some women stressed the downside of the perceived individuality. They disliked the fact that in Malaysia everybody had to take care of him- or herself and even worked at an old age, instead of having ‘happy domestic lives’. It was also mentioned that married children do not take care of their parents, as they live separately rather than with the extended family, which guarantees that they provide for their elders as well. They stressed that they liked to work and wanted to have that opportunity in Bangladesh, yet they wanted to work only for a limited period of time. There was more general criticism particularly concerning the hostility and condescension they often encountered from Malaysians. Many had suffered from frequent denigrating remarks about Bangladesh’s alleged backwardness. Moreover, Bangladeshis were frequently robbed of their money and gold jewellery, which induced fear in many of the women.

Over the years, most women had become comfortable with the lifestyle in Malaysia and confident about taking care of themselves. Some women did not necessarily regard the increased self-dependence as positive or ‘empowering’. Doing errands was not a choice but a necessity, as one woman pointed out. Yet, most women also remarked their greater feeling of self-reliance. Although many were burdened by the sorrows of meagre earnings and having to send money home, taking care of themselves had given them more experience and self-confidence. Most of the women – except those in factory 2 and the sweatshop that was described in the previous chapter – looked healthy and well fed. As one woman said: ‘At home, the best food is always for my husband and son. I miss them during meals. But here it is I who eat well.’

After work, the women usually did their household chores, such as cooking and doing laundry, or took a bath and relaxed. A popular pastime was watching Hindi
movies on TV or video. Women’s outdoor activities mostly took place in the neighbourhood: taking a stroll to the shop down the street or making a call from a nearby phone booth to relatives or friends elsewhere in Malaysia. Women might visit other female factory workers at neighbouring houses, and sometimes talk to Bangladeshi male relatives or friends at the gates of their houses — but never inside, since men are not allowed into the houses of women, a rule that everyone complied with. Many were on friendly terms with Indonesian or local neighbours, with whom they occasionally chatted and conferred, or whose toddlers were spoiled by the cookies and hugs provided by everyone. However, the women were usually among other Bangladeshis, and their social orientation, or interaction, was primarily geared towards their own community.

Since the working days were long and many also worked overtime at the weekends, the amount of free time was limited. Once or twice a month, the women would leave in small groups to do their shopping in town. Bangladeshi men were more visible in the public realm: they bicycled to visit friends in other neighbourhoods and met up at local restaurants for coffee.

Naturally, many missed their family members and loved ones at home. Being away was particularly hard for those who were mothers. They often cried when talking to us about their children, most of whom were living within the extended family or with their parents. It was often mentioned that they tried to keep themselves busy in order to avoid feeling homesick. Their interactions with the home country were sporadic and mainly took place via letters. Some women who could not write would ask for help from friends. Others sent messages recorded on cassette tapes. Phone calls to relatives in Bangladesh were made only in cases of emergency or great emotional urgency; overseas phone calls were too expensive. Few went home for a visit during the years they lived in Malaysia. As Phizacklea (2003:80) points out, transnational connections differ markedly among migrants: the transnational connections of unskilled labour migrants are hardly comparable with those of migrants who are employed as skilled employees or are international students, for example. Men and women alike kept themselves informed of the political and economic situation in Bangladesh through someone who had been home or acquaintances who had access to Bangladeshi newspapers. The grapevine also proved to be rather effective in exchanging rumours between and spreading them within the two countries.

Bangladeshi culture thus remained pivotal in the migrants’ daily lives and social orientation. Practices of the ‘here’ were continuously reconciled with their past experiences and actions ‘there’. Within the Bangladeshi context, women’s adherence

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5. Almost every house had a TV and VCR. In some cases they were provided by the company; in other cases they had been bought by one of the women and would be taken home upon her return to Bangladesh (these were desired and prestigious consumer goods to be taken home). We often watched movies with women; it was said that they distracted them from their worries.

6. A Bangladeshi woman who listened to the weekly BBC World broadcast from Bangladesh, was teasingly called ‘the journalist’; she kept her colleagues well informed. Women often asked my Bangladeshi research assistant, Hasina, who had recently arrived from Bangladesh, about the situation in Bangladesh.
to purdah is at the core of the gender discourse (Kabeer 2000:34). Women in this study never questioned purdah; on the contrary, its importance was often emphasized. As seen in Chapter 6, their interpretation of purdah – like that of other working women in Bangladesh – differed somewhat from the conventional interpretation. Many regarded purdah to essentially be ‘of the mind’; that is, purdah resembles a state of mind. Whether a woman lived in purdah depends on her heart and her mind, in other words, on her intentions. Virtuous intentions would guide her actions, behaviour and demeanour, which would then be equally virtuous and modest; hence, she would observe purdah. Additionally, some women emphasized their faith, their ‘piousness’, and the fact that Allah watched over them and witnessed their ‘pure hearts and clean minds’: Allah was their ‘true’ witness, no matter what people thought or said. Essentially, these women placed strong emphasis on their own responsibility: living up to purdah depended on their own actions, rather than on control by guardians and the community, which is the hegemonic interpretation of purdah in Bangladesh.

Being dressed and covered properly was seen as an integral part of purdah, as it exemplifies a woman’s decency, her ‘pure’ mind and sincere intentions. Ideally, a woman wears a sari and covers her head with its ends. According to some women, one should also wear a burka (a long, loose garment covering the whole body from head to feet) when outside the house. For practical reasons, in Malaysia, shalwar kameez (a long dress, loose trousers and a scarf covering the chest and head) was regarded as the most suitable and appropriate attire.7 By highlighting modesty and ‘goodness’ through proper clothing, once more the emphasis was on women’s inner virtues, which effectively legitimized their actions or mobility. Shazeda, a pious woman, reported the following:

We can work outside and still keep our purdah. We can cover our bodies with a burka and move around. A woman who does not have a burka can cover her body with a piece of cloth. The meaning is the same. It is written in the Koran that with one piece of cloth you cover your body. After covering our body we can open our face. If any man sees this and makes a comment, it is not our sin. This is written in the hadith [tradition].

Women’s renegotiation of the meaning of purdah effectively entailed a renegotiation of the boundaries of permissible behaviour in order to expand their sphere of agency and decision making (Kabeer 2000:34).

Gendered norms of social behaviour are often largely internalized. They are part of habitus – the unquestioned, routine practices and habits that derive from a person’s upbringing and interaction with others (Jenkins 1992:74; Vertovec 2003:9). By stepping outside the sociocultural context in which they were raised and obser-

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7. In Bangladesh, shalwar kameez (which originates from north-west India) is generally worn only by adolescent unmarried women and factory women. Apart from being practical for factory work, wearing shalwar kameez is sometimes also associated with being modern or trendy (Amin 1997:35).
vying alternative ways of ‘being and doing’ in the host country, the internalized gendered notions of which they are not consciously aware are likely to be brought to their conscious awareness (Agarwal 1994; Kabeer 1999:441). As observed in the discussion above, by witnessing alternative gendered practices in Malaysia, many Bangladeshi women re-evaluated gendered customs in their native context. For some, the alternative views were entirely new; for others, they affirmed or provided a vocabulary for sentiments they had long felt. While not all aspects of gender roles and behaviour as practised in Malaysia were approved of, they provided food for thought and led to renegotiations of the women’s gendered ideas and practices.

Nevertheless, while quite a number of the women were very outspoken, confident and unequivocal concerning their renegotiated views on gender norms and roles, for others, especially the younger women, this process was an ambiguous one that went hand in hand with bouts of doubt and inner conflict (c.f. Brouwer 1998; Espín 1999:26). Women would occasionally make seemingly contradictory remarks, sometimes criticizing the way they lived in Malaysia (e.g. leaving the home and going to the market), and sometimes elaborating enthusiastically about what they had gained and achieved socially whilst abroad. While these inconsistencies sometimes appeared to be due to a woman’s attempt to represent herself in socioculturally correct ways, then forgetting about it and dropping her role at another point, contradictory remarks were also made for other reasons. Although much of their new lives ‘felt right’, they were often criticized by the Bangladeshi community, which adhered to the hegemonic (Bangladeshi) gender discourse, as is shown in the following sections. The younger women felt the most vulnerable to stigmatization, as they would need to marry after returning home. The general critique of their lives, in combination with personal internalized notions of appropriate behaviour, confused women at times and led to inner conflict and questioning. Farhana:

We are giving Bengalis a bad name in this country. We wear the dress of this country. Do you think I have no fault? I am also guilty. I am in love, seeing other women wearing this dress [shirt and trousers]. I go shopping and I do this and that. Actually when I think about it, I realize this is not correct. But again I think, who will do my shopping? So I go out. I wear what Malaysian women wear; I feel it is all right. But I should not do it.

Fear of social repercussions intermingled with doubt that the critics were ‘right’ after all. Likewise, while many of the women felt that their behaviour was not at odds with God’s word, many were not always entirely sure. It felt right, but was it?

When explaining that purdah is about the mind and not about seclusion per se, Helena (a divorced woman) remarked matter-of-factly that taking the teachings literally, as is conventionally done, is practically impossible. Basically, God could not have meant it that way. Yet, at another point she said: ‘I have the fear of death. Freeness in life is all right here, but not according to the Hadith [the written Islamic tradition]. It has consequences for the life hereafter.’

It is worth noting that what women are and are not permitted to do according to the Koran and the Hadith can be and is variously interpreted by Islamic scholars?
Making sense of reality was not always straightforward (cf. Mernissi 1991). The moulding and fusing of the innate convictions and practices of the ‘there’ and the newly acquired customs and beliefs of the ‘here’ often remained an ongoing and conflicting process.

In many migrant communities worldwide, it is often more difficult for women than for men to negotiate ‘acceptable’ behaviour. Women’s needs or desires to adapt to the host culture are often interpreted as being disrespectful to the home culture’s values. When women reconcile their traditional gender roles of the country of origin with the demands of participation in the new environment, culturally based conflicts may develop (Anthias 1992; Brouwer 1998; Espín 1999:23). This was the case in the Bangladeshi community in Malaysia. Many Bangladeshi men disapproved of both the women’s renegotiated definition of purdah and the lives they led in Malaysia.

8.3 Defamation

The Bangladeshi community in Malaysia was overwhelmingly composed of men. Many of them felt that their countrywomen’s migration to Malaysia was a violation of appropriate gender norms. Bangladeshi women’s unguarded lives in Malaysia were frequently criticized. As described in Chapter 4, the commencement of our fieldwork in Malaysia in the summer of 1999 coincided with a wave of defamatory stories in Bangladeshi tabloid magazines about Bangladeshi women in Malaysia. The general message was that they lived ‘immoral lives’. The stories often seemed to be excessively exaggerated or even made up, yet nevertheless could destroy the accused women’s lives. Some of the men who wrote these stories, mostly migrants working in Malaysian factories, had made unsuccessful advances towards the women they wrote about. Writing a defamatory story was a way of publicly taking revenge for being rejected.8 However, spreading defamatory stories often seemed to serve a more general goal as well. The stories tried to prove that only ‘immoral’ women migrate, and hence indicated a desire to reverse this new trend and restore conventional gender norms for women. Dannecker (2005:662) argues that the bad reputation of Bangladeshi migrant women is the result of successful transnational networking of migrant men, Islamic organizations and some intellectuals. Representatives of these organizations regularly visit male migrant workers in Malaysia and the Middle East. The aim is to strengthen Islamic identity; preserving conventional gender relations is emphasized as a pivotal tool for the maintenance of cultural authenticity.

Gossip and slander often intertwine with moralizing discourses. These are common modes across societies of evaluating people and actions, and are potential-

8. A parallel can be discerned with incidences in Bangladesh whereby turned-down suitors throw acid on the young women they desired. Both practices are aimed at severely scarring the woman and making her ‘unattractive’ to future suitors.
ly important tools of social control (Terbutt 1995; Brouwer 1998; van Vleet 2003:500; Bennett 2005; Elmhirst 2007:234). The defamation of women is historically remarkably common worldwide when women first move into the public domain to take up jobs outside their homes (cf. Massey 1994). As seen in Chapter 3, female factory workers in Bangladesh are often the focal point of similar slander (Amin 1997; Dannecker 1998:199). Likewise, the first generation Malaysian factory women were frequently criticized in the media as ‘kaki enjoy’ (pleasure seekers) who freely mixed with men. These strong reactions appear to emanate from fear and anger. Many men fear that uprooting the gender order and altering the balance of power will undermine their position. Some attempt to counter it by defaming the women in question by portraying them as sexually promiscuous (Daud 1985:114; Ong 1987:179).

In many societies, sexuality is an indicator of women’s moral identity, a source of control held over women. Sexuality is thus intimately linked with power (Foucault 1990; Chang & McAllister Groves 2000:75). Women’s sexual behaviour often marks the boundaries between their inclusion or exclusion from communities or societies (Anthias 1992:26; Terbutt 1995). When, for example, in the 1930s single Irish women migrated en masse to Great Britain, their new lives were frequently criticized as being driven by the search for ‘sinful pleasures’. Their alleged promiscuity was perceived to be the result of the absence of social control. The women were perceived as outcasts (Ryan 2002:55).

Migrant communities throughout the world frequently carry concepts of familial or national honour and dignity that are strongly tied to the woman’s sexual purity (Anthias 1992; Espín 1999:5; Brouwer 1998). Based on her research among various migrant communities in the USA, Espin (1999:7) relates that in the process of adapting to the host society, a stern focus on the preservation of tradition is almost exclusively observed through the gender roles of women. Women’s bodies become the site of struggles concerning disorienting cultural difference. Self-appointed ‘guardians of morality and tradition’, not unlike the Bangladeshi story writers mentioned above, are deeply concerned with women’s roles and sexual behaviour and the preservation of traditional values. Likewise, charges of behaving defiantly and being un-Islamic are instrumentalized through powerful sanctions against what is perceived to be a violation of social norms and values (Amin 1997; Dannecker 1998:199). Studies have shown that for many men, migration implies – at least initially – a loss of status and a threat to their gender identity. Many men therefore attempt to reinforce their own values and norms as way of reassuring their identity in an environment that is strange to them (Itzigsohn & Giorguli-Saucedo 2005:897).

Similarly, Bangladeshi men in Malaysia often spoke negatively about the presence of Bangladeshi women in Malaysia. The majority of men we talked to felt that women should not migrate without their guardians: it was not appropriate; women should stay at home. Many men’s comments revealed that they felt they lacked control over women’s behaviour. For example, Abdul (unmarried) said: ‘Whatever she [a Bangladeshi woman in Malaysia] wants to do, she can do. I cannot comment. I cannot stop her. I cannot interfere or say anything about it.’
In Bangladesh, guardians control women’s lives; they take responsibility for their behaviour and whereabouts. Moreover, if someone sees a woman ‘misbehave’, he can turn to her guardian and he will take care of it (cf. Brouwer 1998). In Malaysia there was no-one to turn to. This imbalance in the traditional gender order was met with frustration and dismay. Men’s general role as guardians was grossly violated; many took on a role of ‘collective guardian’, airing their disapproval.

Some Bangladeshi men recalled their embarrassment when they first saw Bangladeshi women arrive in Malaysia. They had told the Malaysians that in their country Muslim women would be at home, taking care of the family and living ‘good’ lives. They were frequently humiliated by condescending and racist remarks that some Malaysians made regarding the assumed ‘backwardness’ of Bangladesh. The perceived superior status of Bangladeshi women compared to that of Malaysian women (because the former did not work) had given the Bangladeshi men a sense of pride that soon diminished once Bangladeshi women entered the factories in Malaysia. The purity of Bangladeshi women versus the notion of the promiscuity of local women had served to maintain ethnic pride and make them feel morally superior (cf. Espín 1999:29).

Many men reckoned that ‘most’ Bangladeshi women behaved indecently in Malaysia. Although most men said they had not spoken to these women in person, they had ‘heard the stories’ (cf. Dannecker 2005:659). Reasons why they ‘could not talk’ to the women were partly based on gendered notions of appropriate behaviour, and partly on notions of class difference. Men often said that the Bangladeshi women in Malaysia generally came from ‘lower-class’ families; they could not talk to them as the women were illiterate and had ‘no culture’. As stated in Chapter 5, most of the Bangladeshi men we met came from families that were economically better off than the women’s families. Most of the men were also better educated. Class differences, however, were not always as large as perceived. Most women were literate and although their families endured economic adversity, they were not the poorest of the poor. The perceived class difference was partly related to the prevailing notion that only low-class – that is, very poor and ‘uncultured’ – women would leave Bangladesh to work in bidesh. In the absence of unprejudiced communication, many prejudices lingered.

There were, however, men who had talked to their neighbouring countrywomen in Malaysia and held different views. Mohammed (unmarried):

It is said that Bangladeshi women are earning money by going to hotels secretly. This kind of talking is prevalent all over the world. That is the only explanation I

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9. Although many Bangladeshi men claimed they had not talked to Bangladeshi women in person, this was likely not the case for all of them. Some were neighbours and we knew that they had communicated or had made advances. Apparently, for many a man it was a matter of prestige to present himself as not having talked to women.

10. Likewise, two Bangladeshi university lecturers teaching at Malaysian universities informed me that Bangladeshi women who came to work in Malaysia were from the lowest classes and often had rather dubious backgrounds.
can give. I don’t know what is true or not. I personally do not see anything bad in the girls’ lifestyle here. I see them working here in Malaysian factories and sending money home. (...) The girls are not actually bad, very few are. The women are victims of male aggression, of the atmosphere in our society.

Zahid:

Apa, frankly speaking, before some women came to live on this street, I also thought the girls were bad girls. But when these women came and I helped them out when they needed to go to the bank or when there was an emergency, I talked to them a lot and then I understood their honesty. They told me about the problems their families have. That changed my mind. I do not believe any more that they are all bad. Apa [sister], our neighbour women work for 12 hours a day; we see it! They help their families and I respect them for that. Most men do not understand. You know, many men try to go out with the women.

When the first of the Bangladeshi women arrived, their neighbouring Bangladeshi men had offered them assistance. They helped them with groceries, showed them how to bargain and helped with errands, such as sending money home. Despite the growing criticism, some acquaintances had been made. Nevertheless, the rumours spread by tabloid magazines and other means reached the villages in which the Bangladeshi migrant women lived. Several women received letters from their families questioning the environment in Malaysia. Some of their relatives demanded that they return home at once: their living in Malaysia was bringing shame on the family. Shazeda, a married woman, had received an accusing letter from her brother:

My brother wrote me: ‘Apa, because you are in Malaysia our status is lowered.’ He told me so many bad things because of the magazine stories. The way he is talking means that I cannot go back now. Apa, I cannot tell him I came with my money and not your money, who are you to tell me these things. Because if I lose my izzat [honour], it is my parents’ izzat that I have lost.

A few women gave in to the demands to return. Many of those who stayed feared that their izzat had already been tarnished and believed that their chances of marrying a ‘good’ man had been reduced.

The effect of gossip and slander is greatest in tight-knit social systems in which the costs of exclusion are high and there exist few alternatives for social belonging (Merry 1984:296, in de Vries 1990:14). Drawing on the work of Foucault, Ong (1987:180) highlights the crucial role of hegemonic language, that is, the dominant discourse, which constitutes what is considered to be the ‘truth’. ‘The truth’ – namely what is perceived to be ‘reality’ – determines how people’s everyday lives are interpreted and can have a strong bearing on people’s lives. The discourse that ‘Malaysian Bangladeshi women are immoral’ was a powerful ‘truth’ when it was disseminated by men, who are traditionally the keepers of women’s purity in the Bangladeshi context.
However, as is so often the case with slander that is spread via the media, over time the supply of stories printed in magazines dried up. When asked during following encounters a year later, some replied that ‘people talk all the time’ and that they could not be too preoccupied with it as they had to live their own lives. Nevertheless, in women’s individual endeavours to reconcile Bangladeshi norms with their Malaysian lives, the possible repercussions or implications of potential criticism were always considered. The women strived to be seen as respectable and ‘good’ in the eyes of the outer world and to ensure that no rumours regarding them would reach their home town or village (cf. Amin 1997:33; Rozario 1998:263).

8.4 Women about women

In rare cases, friendships had developed among the women who were living together; they cared for each other in small circles of like-minded friends, they cooked and shopped together, and they shared much about each other’s lives. However, the atmosphere in most hostels was not as harmonious and there were frequent clashes. The overcrowded environment that many women lived in stirred conflict and gossip. The one-family houses that served as women’s hostels frequently accommodated ten to twelve women. Some terraced houses, which were a little bigger, accommodated as many as 35 women. Women shared small bedrooms and slept in bunk beds. Bathroom and kitchen facilities were insufficient. Such conditions easily lead to irritation and quarrels. Moreover, some factories worked in shifts. Women had different sleeping patterns and often complained about noise and the impossibility of sleeping while others were cleaning, cooking or listening to music.

However, the troubled relations between many of the women were due not only to overcrowded living conditions. During our visits to women’s homes, we saw that many women simply did not get along well. Many of the women said that they did not trust the other women. The women were cautious in disclosing private thoughts or private matters. It was said that during quarrels, secrets were disclosed and things could become nasty. Some of the women from Dhaka – the ‘big city’ – said that the women from the villages had ‘crude’ and ‘rough’ manners. Also differences in education were sometimes mentioned. The few houses where we found the atmosphere to be harmonious and the women generally supportive of each other, also had women from various geographical, educational and economic backgrounds living together. While other factors may have been at play, the difference from the other homes was that the number of women sharing the house was lower (only 4-9 women) or had a leader (a spokesperson appointed by the company, who was often but not always older and frequently spoke English) who was well respected by the other women. The women were often highly suspicious of one another’s behaviour.

Women would often make a clear distinction between two kinds of ‘freedom’ found in Malaysia. They approved of the first kind, that is, the freedom to go about their daily affairs as described earlier, which included the occasional interaction with someone of the opposite sex (provided the women’s behaviour was virtuous and modest). Some friendships and marriages had developed between women and men.
However, they strongly disapproved of the second kind of freedom, namely ‘immoral behaviour’ and engaging with men in an ‘indecent’ fashion, that is, having sexual relations outside marriage. If someone engaged in the latter it would affect all the women, hence the women watched closely each other’s behaviour.

Although the women stated that many of the stories published about Bangladeshi women were not true or had been wildly exaggerated, they often aired strong criticism of other women’s behaviour in general. We were frequently told that ‘many women’ were ‘bad’; that is, they engaged in immoral affairs with men and were unconcerned about giving all women a bad name. A large number of women we talked to claimed that ‘the majority’ of their peers acted immorally. Although the criticism and gossip did not always take the form of direct sexual accusations, such accusations were often insinuated. A woman’s clothing was something that could evoke criticism. Most women wore Bangladeshi clothes when they left their houses after factory hours. A few women, however, wore shirts and trousers, and sometimes a headscarf, when they went out, just like the young Malay women; their clothes completely covered their bodies. They explained that it was much easier to get around when dressed in this way; one blended in and did not receive comments from people on the street. Other Bangladeshi women often spoke critically about it; they regarded it as indecent and said that these women had forgotten their ‘culture’.

Dannecker (2005:665), who interviewed some returned migrant women in Bangladesh, encountered the same phenomenon. It was not only men who criticized women’s behaviour; many women did the same. The profound criticism aired about each other was at times confusing. If taken literally, these statements would imply that every woman was simultaneously ‘decent’ – as portrayed by herself – and ‘indecent’, as sometimes hinted at by others. The remarks made concerning women’s alleged ‘indecent performance’ partly reflected genuine discontent with the behaviour of some women, something over which one had no control. However, after more observation and by getting to know the women better, it became obvious that many of the disapproving remarks they made about one another were often exaggerated and reflected other sentiments or served other purposes. First, these statements echoed the women’s anxiety, frustration and anger about being judged or stigmatized and about how other women’s behaviour might be regarded and affect their own honour. Second, these remarks were intended to emphasize their personal adherence to social norms. In other words, the remarks partly reflected the way women wanted to present themselves, namely as women who lived morally just lives, in line with prevalent gender norms, as such distinguishing themselves from the ‘other women’, who were viewed as immoral. Like the female factory women in Dhaka (Siddiqui 1991; Rozario 1998:264), Bangladeshi women in Malaysia policed each other. The fear of repercussions and the perceived mutual dependence in terms of ‘image’ resulted in women closely guarding each other’s behaviour and commenting on it critically.

Although the women largely agreed upon the definition of purdah, what was regarded as ‘decent’ in terms of dress code, going out and being ‘modest’ was often questioned and unclear. It was believed that those who adhered to purdah had the dominant gender ideology on their side. Most women did not seem to regard counte-
ring the dominant perceptions on women’s behaviour, gender and sexuality as a viable option. Instead, they went along with the predominant discourse. Few women commented on men’s behaviour or their role in alleged ‘indecent affairs’.

Ong (1987:188) observed a similar lack of solidarity among the first generation of Malay factory workers. She notes that those who were eager to be seen as traditional and conforming blamed the social interaction of their ‘unrestrained’ sisters for tarnishing the collective image of Malay factory workers. Malicious criticism was a common practice. This self-regulation stemmed as much from private resentment and conviction as from imposed conformity (see also Daud 1985:113).

Moreover, since exhibiting highly appropriate feminine behaviour may enhance a woman’s social and symbolic capital (van Vleet 2003:505; Bennett 2005:106),11 depicting other Bangladeshi women in Malaysia as ‘immoral’ confirmed a woman’s own adherence to prevalent gender norms. In other words, by focusing on the substantiation of the ‘bad girl’ image, a woman emphasizes that she does not belong to that group and confirms or establishes her own image of being a decent woman. Presenting oneself this way is hence partly strategic. Rozario (1998) encountered a similar situation when studying female factory women in Dhaka. The women she interviewed commonly compared their own ‘goodness’ with the qualities of the other women around them. As Rozario (1998:264) argues, by relaying the bad behaviour of one or several other women in her vicinity she suggests that she herself is ‘good’. The study by Chang and McAllister Groves (2000) among female domestic workers from the Philippines in Hong Kong came up with similar findings: the migrant women who were often depicted as sexually loose – that is, as prostitutes – were found to watch each other’s every move.

The women’s attempts to resist the label of ‘prostitute’ thus exacts a power struggle for the moral high ground, with gossip as a means of portraying oneself as a chaste and devoted member by foisting the label onto others. ‘Everyone wants to be higher than the other,’ one woman explained. ‘Even if they have to trample one another, (…)’ (Chang & McAllister Groves 2000:83)

Paradoxically, the tendency to judge other women by the hegemonic standards a woman is personally judged by, enforces a woman’s lack of liberation from repressive standards (cf. Ong 1987:191).

Effectively, the women reproduced the moral pressure that was placed upon them. The moral system was transplanted from Bangladesh to Malaysia by men and women alike, and the renegotiated meaning of purdah ‘of the mind’ and essentially of a woman’s own responsibility was not generally granted to others.

Sometimes, there was yet another explanation for the harsh words that the Bangladeshi women uttered about their countrywomen. Although they seemed to con-

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11. Van Vleet (2003) comes to this conclusion after studying an Andean community in Bolivia, and Bennett (2005) after studying single women in eastern Indonesia; this underlines the fact that the findings presented here are not necessarily Bangladeshi, Asian or Islamic.
demn them, their callous words at times emanated from the desire to prevent their fellow women from being harmed. Parveen, for example, was an elderly widow who often used very harsh words when talking about the behaviour of other women. When I visited her after her return to Bangladesh, I came to understand that in fact she cared deeply for the other women. She had talked to them harshly, trying to protect the young women from their own ‘naivety’. She felt that the women would suffer the consequences of rumours and stigmatization, and wanted to prevent them from falling for men by scaring them. Her reprimands were rooted in her conviction that doing things the conventional way would make them happier; that is, parents should choose husbands for their daughters. Too much liberty would make them fall prey to men with bad intentions. Gossip can be an important mechanism for controlling women’s behaviour, reinforcing the pressure of self-regulation (Rozario 1998:264), as discussed in this chapter. However, Parveen, like other women who had taken on a leader role, found to her dismay that while many women generally paid her respect, they would not listen to her or heed her advice.

### 8.5 Courtship

While not necessarily uncontested, dating and courtship have become common among young urban people, including factory workers, in Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries (Daud 1985; Ong 1987; Manderson & Liamputtong 2002; Stivens 2002; Bennett 2005; Rydstrøm 2006). Courtship can be defined as the period between single status and married life in which young adolescents meet and may choose to have a more durable relationship with each other and marry. Courtship also alludes to the ways young people circumvent and renegotiate parental and societal norms (Manderson & Liamputtong 2002:7).

In the course of time, as Daud (1985) and Ong (1987) explain, it has become more common for Malaysian factory workers to have boyfriends. Apart from romantic feelings, they want someone to confide in and to help them solve problems, be they personal, financial or work-related problems. Moreover, women want to choose their own grooms (Daud 1985:123). During interviews, a Malaysian unionist and an employee of a local NGO also referred to the dating practices among Malaysian factory workers. They had found that, at least during the early days when wages were lower, having a boyfriend also meant having someone to take them out for meals. In this way, young women saved more money to send home or spend differently (personal communication with unionists and NGOs). Recent studies on Malaysian factory women including their dating practices have not come to my attention; more research is needed. Dating and boyfriends – which are salient topics in the lives of factory women all over the world – receive surprisingly little attention in the vast literature on women in FTZs.

Soon after their arrival in Malaysia, Bangladeshi men started dating Malaysian women. It was unanimously admitted by men and women alike that the majority
had girlfriends. The Bangladeshis were very popular among Malay and, later, Indonesian migrant women. The Bangladeshis were said to be ‘handsome’ and ‘polite’ (personal communications with Malaysian female workers and Bangladeshi men). Local men, however, were not pleased with this development, which ultimately resulted in tension and even large-scale riots between local and Bangladeshi men.

The men, for whom the concept of courtship was fairly new, adopted the courting practices that are customary among Malaysian factory workers. They found that they were expected to take their girlfriends out for meals and buy them gifts, and so they did. Gifts ranged from toiletries and clothes, to gold necklaces and mobile phones. When the men who were working in a factory where there was no overtime were asked whether they had girlfriends, they said that they could no longer afford one. Having a girlfriend did not come cheap: many men spent a substantial amount of money on their girlfriends.

A topic closely related to the dating issue is sexuality, something that has received little research attention in Asia or elsewhere (Kulick & Willson 1995; Manderson & Liamputtong 2002:3). As activists working on migrant workers’ issues and AIDS/HIV have pointed out throughout the years, migrant workers – like every adult human being – have sexual needs and are likely to be sexually active (Tenaganita 2005). Bangladeshi men confirmed that they occasionally had sexual intercourse, either with their local girlfriends or with a paid prostitute. I was in no position to openly discuss women’s sexuality. Due to the sensitive situation, any question from my part on women’s sexuality would have been regarded with great suspicion and have instilled fear that I would spread defamatory stories – a situation I did not choose to co-create.

While it is likely that some of the women had affairs, they chose not to discuss the issue with us. It was frequently said that those who had affairs were not the unmarried women, but the women who were married or had been married before. It was also said that women would not have become immoral had wages been fair and just. The material needs of families at home had led some women to engage in affairs with men who gave them gifts such as gold necklaces and bought them food. While plausible, these were second-hand stories, which in the circumstances I could not verify.

Over the years, I got to know some of the women who had been pointed out to me as being particularly ‘immoral’ and ‘bad’. It was easy to understand why within the Bangladeshi socio-economic context they had acquired the reputation they had. I knew their situation well and it was obvious that such labels utterly misrepresented these women, their decisions and their situation. Ferdousi’s story is a case in point (see also section 5.5: Married women, for her motivation for migration). She was described by her female ex-colleagues and her male neighbours as a ‘very bad

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12. The comments by Bangladeshi men quoted on the issue of dating in Dannecker’s (2005:660) study are therefore slightly amusing: while the men ‘have been able to withstand the temptations abroad, women are too weak to resist’.
woman’. She had been married when she came to Malaysia. Her husband had not approved of her migration, but she had left anyway with her parents’ assistance. Her husband did not have a job and did not support her and her children. He had followed her to Malaysia using the illicit route via Thailand and found employment in Kuala Lumpur. He came to visit her to urge her to go home and ‘be a good wife’. She refused, and when she also refused to go with him to a hotel to spend some private moments together, he beat her badly. He called the management of her factory to make sure they would send her home. Arguing that she was needed there, he terminated her contract. Ferdousi then fled to another town in Malaysia.

Ferdousi had married when she was only 11. Her husband had physically abused her throughout their marriage. With the help of a friend, she obtained official papers from Bangladesh and divorced her husband. She found new employment elsewhere and married a man of her own choice. This man was younger than her, and this was part of the critique her actions had evoked. Her new husband was an intelligent and gentle man who appeared to respect her and stayed with her in the years to follow – also after their return to Bangladesh, as we later found. In Malaysia, Ferdousi seldom went out and when she did she always wore a veil. She did this not only to prove her honourableness to others, but also to be at ease with herself: to feel that she was an honourable woman who had made decisions that were in the best interest of her children and herself. She also was a pious woman. Concerning the rumours about her, she said:

I feel good. I have no stress any more, I can sleep at night and my back no longer hurts. If I did not have a husband, who would look after me if problems occur? You are a university graduate; you can take care of yourself. We cannot do easily. If we don’t have a husband, men can easily abuse us; it is not safe.

In short, while Ferdousi was often depicted as being an immoral woman, she in fact was someone who had freed herself of an abusive husband who had tried to rule her life. She carved out a life of her own choosing, one that was both free of abuse and emotionally more satisfying.

We witnessed that several unmarried Bangladeshi women and men had started to court in Malaysia. In Bangladesh, courtship is not very common. Parents and other relatives generally arrange their children’s marriages. It is generally not socially acceptable for an unmarried person to meet someone of the opposite sex. Nevertheless, it is common knowledge in villages and elsewhere that men and women regularly fall in love with each other; they meet secretly to share brief and treasured moments in places such as near the pond or in the fields.13 Although extra-marital love is a taboo and officially non-existent, many traditional songs and tales tell of love outside marriage that was strong but not meant to last (Guhatakurta 2002; personal communications). In Malaysia, some men and women befriend each other as a

13. University campuses, where students are less secretive about it, are perhaps a more open example.
result of the former helping the latter out with errands and sharing their daily experiences. Nazma: ‘When a woman has problems, feels hati susa [Malay for being sad; literally ‘difficult heart’], or when she is upset, she can talk with her boyfriend. A lot of talking helps; after that she feels better.’

Some friendships became more romantic. It was not uncommon to see a man and a woman talking to each other in front of the woman’s home or taking a stroll through the neighbourhood, quietly talking to each other. As men and women worked long days and did not always live in the same area, they did not see each other often – on average only twice a month. During our last field period in Malaysia, we noted that mobile phones had become popular and seemed to have revolutionized couples’ courting through frequent phone calls.14

Shared experiences of factory employment and living in bidesh had led to emotional and mental bonding, which had culminated in the desire to be together and marry. Many unmarried or divorced young women had migrated with the aim of ultimately improving their say and chances in marriage. The stigmatization episode, which was expected to have a negative impact on the women’s desirability as prospective brides upon their return to Bangladesh, had decreased many women’s chance of a favourable marriage. Marrying a man they had befriended and liked in Malaysia seemed only natural.

I found that unmarried women were very cautious about engaging in anything that might jeopardize their honour, let alone lead to the loss of their virginity. They feared social stigma; many women could not be entirely sure about the intentions of their suitors. Were they honourable – and would they really marry them as promised? Also, many young women simply seemed frightened and not ready for sexual intercourse: they were unfamiliar with the act, which was not uncommonly pushed for by men. Hameeda’s remark summarizes many young women’s sentiment. Hameeda: ‘We girls do like to talk to the boys, it is true. But the boys very much like to sleep with the girls; the girls actually do not want that.’

For young Bangladeshi women the significance of courtship is intrinsically related to the goal of procuring a marriage partner (cf. Bennett 2005:103). Getting married is generally less important to men than to women, because other powerful social roles are open to them. Moreover, men are not socially penalized for engaging in sexual relations the way women are (Manderson & Liamputtong 2002:8). Many young women are confronted with the problem of remaining chaste while keeping their male suitors hooked in order to marry them (Jennaway 2002).15 Several interesting studies of reproductive health and HIV/AIDS among young people, including factory women, found that young men and women who have sexual relations often have very different motives for engaging in them. Young women are often motivated by the fear of losing a boyfriend or potential marriage partner, and hence give in to the subtle pressure from the partner to have sex and believe their promises of a permanent relationship. As a female factory worker in Thailand stated: ‘Young

14. Only a few women had mobile phones, but others often received calls on their friends’ mobiles.
women think that if they have sex with their boyfriends, they will keep them forever – and that is a big mistake’ (Soonthorndhada 1994; Kwon Tai-Hwan et al. 1994; Ehrenfeld 1999). Bangladeshi men regularly have different intentions than claimed and were found to often put pressure on their Bangladeshi girlfriends to sleep with them. Women urged each other not to give in. A few had succumbed to the pressure, believing the sweet talk about soon-to-be, or hastily arranged marriages. When they were abandoned, these women were commonly referred to by others as ‘bad’, that is, as immoral. As is the case in many societies, it is the women who are penalized and held accountable for any sexual deviance (Ryan 2002:61; Rydstrøm 2006). Serious dating that would end in marriage was thus an issue for many young women. A closer look at the issue is taken below.

8.6 Potential grooms and marriages

A ‘good’ man was defined as a potential husband whose intentions are genuine, who is gentle and hard working, and whose family is respectable. Although women often seemed to disagree, there was surprising unanimity about certain known men being ‘good’; these were boyfriends of some of their peers. A good man did not pressure a woman into a physical relationship before marriage. He treated her well. Moreover, a good man was expected to not demand a dowry. When I asked a woman whether her partner demanded a dowry, the question was sometimes regarded as offensive (‘This is about love, not about money!’). Many commented on love-based versus money-based relationships. The latter not only included dowry demands but also excessive gifts received by the women. When relationships were serious, both the women and the men said that there were no large transactions from one to another, except perhaps in cases of emergency. We witnessed that in relationships that appeared to be balanced, happy and accepted by the parents, no major financial transactions had taken place thus far.

The Bangladeshi men knew that they would not get very far if they did not show their genuine commitment. Not surprisingly, couples would often discuss marriage very soon after they had first met. While dating was taken on as a ‘Malaysian’ custom, it was moulded to a Bangladeshi reference framework. Unlike Malaysian women, Bangladeshi women were in no position to ‘break up’ with suitors who turned out to be less desirable matches or to eventually meet someone else without being socially discredited for being ‘immoral’, even if they had kept their virginity. The purpose of courtship – namely exploring the possibility of a long-term relationship – was thus somewhat defeated.

While a few couples were openly engaged, others were more secretive about their liaisons. Most women were careful and proceeded slowly. Both men and women frequently activated networks of relatives and friends to find out about the other person’s background. It seemed that the men’s connections were sometimes more diverse than the women’s; they often had more relatives or connections through Bangladeshi men in Malaysia who helped them out. A man would try to find out whether the woman was honourable, that is, whether her izzat was intact. Women
would do the same thing concerning their male suitors. Via friends, friends’ connections and sometimes relatives who worked elsewhere in Malaysia, they would try to trace the background of the men, and to find out whether they were who they said they were and were indeed unmarried. One way of finding out about the potential husband’s family situation is to read the letters his sister writes to him. As one woman explained: ‘Because I know that when my sister writes to me, she will also talk about the family’s problems.’

When a couple have decided that they want to marry, the potential groom may take a trip to Bangladesh to discuss the matter with both his own parents and those of his potential bride. At other times, couples arrange their marriage in Malaysia, with or without relatives or fictive relatives in Malaysia acting as guardians and mediators. Marriage documents are sent from Bangladesh and a ceremony is conducted. Although a dowry is generally not demanded, a kabir (brides wealth) is agreed upon. Kabir is a kind of insurance for the benefit of the bride: it is a sum of money a groom commits to pay if he divorces the woman. Malaysian law does not allow migrant workers to marry in Malaysia; hence, the marriages are semi-legally arranged but are nonetheless legal when the official Bangladeshi marriage documents sent by relatives are signed.

The main worry of many prospective couples concerned gaining the consent of their parents and relatives in Bangladesh. Couples often strive to return to Bangladesh together, as it is feared that if one returns earlier, parents and other relatives might pressure them into marrying someone else – and sometimes, as we saw, this does indeed happen.

Of the 36 young women (24 unmarried, 12 divorced) whom we got to know better and who were relatively open about the topic, 29 were seeing someone. We talked to 25 of these women more elaborately at various points in time; their experiences are included in the analyses below. Nine others (5 unmarried and 4 divorced) were ‘going steady’, but chose not to discuss the matter.

Three different groups and scenarios of newly married or engaged couples were discerned: those women who got married or engaged and were having stable and happy relationships; those who were at different stages in their relationship but were anxious about how things were evolving; and those who had been abandoned by their suitors and may well have lost a considerable amount of money in the process.

Happily engaged/married

Eight of the originally unmarried women had married in Malaysia; their families had accepted their marriage and their relationships appeared to be stable. Several other unmarried women had become engaged with the consent of their parents and would officially marry on their return home. These women were confident and content. Fatima had met her husband via her friend, whose brother was in Malaysia too and had once brought a friend when he visited:

He wanted to know my name, educational qualification and other things. Then he invited us to his house for his birthday. In this way, we met each other again.
Through my girlfriend he asked for my friendship. I accepted his proposal, but my girlfriend disagreed. Then we contacted each other through letters; our relationship developed and we finally got married. (...) The maternal uncle of my husband arranged our marriage ceremony very secretly, without inviting our friends and colleagues. According to the terms of overseas employment in Malaysia, no foreign employee can get married here. We managed to get our kabin nama [marriage document] from Bangladesh with a den mohr [bride price] of 20,000 takas. The maternal uncle of my husband fixed the amount. All members of my family as well as the family of my husband know that we are married.

Fatima had a stable relationship and was very happy. She had been working in the garments industry in Bangladesh.

The men these women had married, or wanted to marry, respected and loved their wives or wives-to-be. I met some of the men frequently, and witnessed the agony they suffered and the hurdles they had to overcome in their families to obtain their parents’ consent to marry the women of their choice. Much time could pass before solutions were found or strategic moves could be made. Meanwhile, the men stood by their girlfriends and reassured them that things would turn out well. Morshed was a case in point: the woman he loved – a smart young woman called Afroza – came from a family of less economic standing than his. Moreover, Afroza had fallen ill due to stress. She required medical care, for which Morshed paid. He respected her needs and honour and was praised for this by all the women who knew them.

Most women did not live with their husbands, as hostels were often compulsory and renting a private place was expensive. Hence, as mentioned above, couples saw each other only at weekends or even every other weekend. Spouses had their own bank accounts and were saving for their common future, while some women said they still sent money to their parents.

Unsure

For other women, the process had gone less smoothly. Four of the unmarried women, one woman who had married in Malaysia and three of the divorced women were unsure and anxious about the future of their relationships. Marium was a young woman who had left to work in Malaysia because her family had faced sudden financial distress. As her peers recalled, her family repeatedly wrote her to request that she send money. She had married a man in Malaysia. Marium:

I am still scared even though we are married, because his family is more hi-fi [higher class]. They are all highly educated. Five of his brothers are; they have good jobs, some abroad. We are nothing compared to them. If my husband does not recognize me as his wife after returning to Bangladesh, what will I do? This is my only fear.
I asked whether her family had known that they were getting married. Marium said that they had known but that nobody had said anything to her about it. When I asked whether her husband’s family had known, she replied:

I do not know. This is my only fear. He did not tell me whether he informed his family or not. He says: ‘I am a man. When my family tells me I should get married, I will tell them I am married.’ He always says to me that he will keep me well and will accept me till death. He says such things. Even so, I have fear. But what else can I do but believe him? I am happy because I could get married. Though if it does not last, then how can I be happy? But I am happy at present. (..) One day, he saw me. Then he gathered information about me, and he called me on the phone. I told him I could not believe him. He kept calling for me and I talked to him. At last, after seven months, he married me to make me believe him. The deed of marriage, kabin [bride price], was 50,000 takas. He arranged it all; I did not do anything. I did not have anything to say then. Then I was not aware of myself as such. I could not understand many things at that time. I would not have married if I had had the understanding I have nowadays. There were no relatives to take advice from. Friends here get married as they wish, because marriage stops the rumours. Then people do not say bad thing if one talks to a boy. So they get married. We got married after we’d known each other for seven months. (...) All of them [men] say that they will marry. In the end, though, the affairs do not last long. There are so many lies.

Her husband had visited Bangladesh after they had married; he was supposed to stay for two weeks but ended up staying for five months. Marium feared what was rumoured, namely that his family had meanwhile married him to someone else. Marium was tormented and upset; she cried during our conversation. Her example exemplifies the power imbalance in relationships: the fear of being socially branded and the desire to marry and be regarded as honourable had led some women to agree to marry their suitors a little hastily.

While others were perhaps more careful, they did not necessarily feel less anxiety. Tasnema’s suitor, Ahmed, had returned permanently to Bangladesh because of health problems. They still intended to marry after Tasnema’s return from Malaysia. Ahmed’s mother had seen her picture and regarded her complexion as ‘too black’, yet had not openly disapproved of the marriage. Tasnema aired her doubts about being able to earn enough during her remaining time in Malaysia for a dowry, which apparently was expected in this case. She was anxious about her looks, her age and her potential husband’s health. What this lively young woman wanted more than anything else, was to be respectfully married.

Abandoned

Finally, there was a group of women whose suitors had left them. Four had been unmarried, of whom one had married her suitor in Malaysia; two had divorced
before coming to Malaysia.\textsuperscript{16} Their relationships did not last and the grief was often profound. One was heartbroken over her lost love and lost izzat. In addition, most of these women had lost a lot of money to the men they had envisioned marrying.

Rahana’s story is exemplifying. Rahana was a young woman who had identified herself to us as being unmarried; however, we later found out that she had been divorced shortly after she had been married prior to coming to Malaysia. During earlier discussions it had become clear that she had come to Malaysia because she wanted to help her family financially and also hoped to earn their respect and love that way. In Malaysia, a friendly man from her home district in Bangladesh had befriended her. They talked on the phone, and once or twice a month he took her to the market on a Saturday afternoon. Everybody knew about their relationship. Her parents had been informed; they had reluctantly given their permission as he had promised to marry her. Then his family called him back. As his father was said to be ill, they needed money for his treatment. Rahana lent him 9000 ringgits, a large part of which she had borrowed from other women. He stayed for six months. Later, they heard through the grapevine that he had married another woman while in Bangladesh. Sabina, Rahana’s friend, recalled:

At first, we thought he had cheated her all along. But actually his parents had played a trick on him. They did not want him to marry Rahana. They saw her picture and said she was kalo [black, i.e. having a dark complexion]. His father was not sick. Now he has come back to Malaysia and he wants to see Rahana. He still wants to marry her, and he says he wants to give her all her money back.

Rahana told us that she had no intention of seeing him again; all was lost. She sighed. ‘What should I do? Marry him and destroy the life of the other woman? And become a second wife?’ Since everybody had known about their engagement, including her family back home, she had lost not only an enormous amount of money, but also her prestige and izzat. Needless to say, she was devastated: ‘I am dead already.’

Rahana’s story is not an isolated case; several other women had had similar experiences. Many of the women had spent several thousand ringgits helping their potential grooms, often so that they could obtain new permits and passports, as had many of the women who were ‘unsure’ concerning the course of their relationship (the category discussed above). Some of the potential grooms had absconded from their factories because of low wages and the hope of earning more elsewhere; others had wanted to stay on after their visas expired in order to be with their partners. In some cases the engagement had been broken off because the parents disapproved of the marriage; in other cases, it seemed that the man had never seriously intended to marry the woman in the first place. It seems that for a few men, promising marriage and sweet-talking women into sharing their wages with them was an easy way to supplement their meagre wages.

\textsuperscript{16} We knew a few more women who had had experienced abandonment; however, they chose to not talk about their misfortune with us, which we respected. Their stories are therefore not included here.
Hence, although the women criticized each other and carefully represented themselves as adhering to hegemonic gender norms, many of them sought, individually and privately, to renegotiate those norms, by melding Malaysian ways of being and doing – and thus of courtship – with their own culture’s goal of marriage. Bennett (2005:103), who studied young single women in eastern Indonesia, put it another way: women may support oppressive systems through their silence and public performance, but may simultaneously subvert and transform the nature of those systems privately. As seen in this section, it seems that this worked out well for quite a number of the women. For others, though, things had not evolved as envisioned. It is not possible to establish why it worked out for some and not for others without venturing into the field of psychology, which is beyond the scope of this study. A few observations can, however, be made.

Of the women we spoke to, more divorced women than unmarried women had been abandoned or deceived. This appears to reflect the relatively lower level of social respect that divorcees generally receive. While perhaps a chicken or egg issue, those who were happily engaged or married were strong, self-confident women who radiated an air of ‘don’t mess with me’ – and no-one did. Although they did not overrule their partners and acted as honourable and respectful wives or wives-to-be in accordance with Bangladeshi gender norms, they had a clear say in the conditions under which their relationships took shape. This hypothesis requires more research, but it appears that those who saw themselves as powerful and as being in charge of their own lives and destinies had a better chance of ending up in sustainable and balanced relationships than did women who feared their powerlessness and unfortunate endings. Some of the women who had been deceived admitted that they had given in too easily to pressure from the men or their peers. As Mariam explained above, to prevent gossip, decisions were taken hastily. Although the ideal of no dowry payment as mentioned earlier was often referred to, ironically many women had succumbed to paying money to show her commitment and affection, hoping to bind the man to her. In some cases, it appeared that women had felt that they could make up for not engaging physically with their suitors by financially assisting them.

Combining social customs of the ‘here’ and the ‘there’ while holding an unfavourable social position compared to their countrymen, left many women feeling vulnerable and torn by inner conflict. While several men respected the women they were with, others did not. Women’s and men’s internalized notions of traditional gender roles often perpetuated unequal gender relations.

8.7 Staying on

At the time of our second extended fieldwork in Malaysia, the women had been in Malaysia for an average of four years and the men for five years. Many migrants knew that their employers were only willing to extend their contracts for about another year. Most of the migrants I talked to would have liked to stay in Malaysia for a couple of years longer, if not indefinitely. An obvious reason was the desire and need
to earn more money, as wages were lower than had been expected (cf. Ishida & Hassan 2000). As Rita, a young unmarried woman who had gone to Malaysia to earn for her family, said: ‘I have two older sisters. I have sent golden jewellery and money, but I was unable to send money for their dowries. That is why my life is hell.’

Some of the women said that so far they had been sending money to their families, and that now it was time to save something for themselves, so that they would have something to fall back on when times got rough or unexpected situations arose. They also needed to save up to buy the gifts they were expected to bring back upon their return. Wanting to stay on was not at variance with missing the homeland. While many of the women admired Malaysia economically and socioculturally, they missed desh (their homeland): spiritually, there was nothing that surpassed desh. This was also expressed in food. Many had food items sent to them, such as pickles; food from their desh was dearly missed (cf. Gardner 1993).

However, money was not the only reason many women did not want to return home yet: some simply preferred their lives in Malaysia over what they expected upon their return to Bangladesh. As Josna, a divorced woman without children, said: ‘At home I need to listen to my relatives’ comments all the time. Here I can work, earn my money and have my peace.’

Men, on the other hand, never desired to stay longer simply because they enjoyed being in Malaysia; earning more money was usually their only incentive to stay on. Most men were troubled by the generally hostile and condescending attitude of Malaysians towards their presence in the country. Although women were also confronted with this attitude, they were far less likely to be publicly harassed, humiliated, robbed or forced to pay bribes than were the Bangladeshi men. This tendency can be witnessed in other host societies, and appears to be related to the fact that migrant men are perceived to be a far greater threat to the local population than migrant women.

While the men’s sociocultural space and social position had decreased since their arrival in Malaysia, the women’s had increased significantly. Several studies on migrant communities in the USA came to similar conclusions: while many of the men wanted to return to their home country at some point, many of the women preferred to stay in the host country, as they enjoy the greater personal freedom and gender equality (Grasmuck & Pessar 1991; Espín 1999:24).

Many of the unmarried women we spoke to received letters from their parents and siblings urging them to come home soon, and saying that it was them they wanted to see, not their money. However, the women did not want to return, as they were fairly sure that they would be married off to men who were not of their choosing. Some of them had made their own marriage plans, as discussed above. Others had no engagements with men in Malaysia, and did not want to marry and be ‘under the control of a man’, as Azma, an unmarried woman, put it. If she had her way, she would never marry, but she knew her parents would not agree. Thus, she tried to stay away for as long as she could. The money argument was still applied to explain why they did not want to return yet. Though it was no longer a convincing argument, parents and other relatives demanding their return had little power to get them to come back.
The women were generally content with their lives in Malaysia. Nevertheless, while for the time being many had succeeded in staying on despite relatives’ pressure for their early return, the situation created much tension and stress for many of the women. They could not postpone their return indefinitely. Furthermore, many missed their parents and siblings, and it was agony to hurt them. For the women with children, the story was different: being separated from their children was excruciating. They contemplated and hoped to return soon, since it was legally impossible to bring their children to Malaysia. These women stayed longer to earn for their children’s future. Some children also urged their mothers to return. Their pleas were more likely to be heeded, although the decision was often a difficult one.

8.8 Conclusion

This chapter highlighted the ways in which the migrant women’s sociocultural orientations are bifocal while living in Malaysia. While the issue is rarely the focus of academic studies, temporary migrants maintain an acute focus on their home country, since they are not permitted to settle down in the host country and know that they will return after several years.

While both Bangladesh and Malaysia are Islamic countries, the gender norms in the two societies differ. Most of the Bangladeshi women appreciated Malaysia’s enlarged gendered space for women, especially women’s right to work and the relatively large amount of social respect and small amount of public criticism that Malaysian women receive. This impacted their lives on all levels: the domain of self, the household domain and the community domain. As is so often the case in migrant communities (Espín 1999; Morokvasic 2003, Mahler & Pessar 2006), Bangladeshi migrant men criticized their countrywomen for adapting to their host country’s gender roles. Men often felt that since moving to Malaysia they had lost in terms of social status and prestige.

Their countrywomen’s bodies and their sexuality became a site of struggle over the perseverance of traditional values and fear of loss of power. The strong reactions of many of the men should be understood in the context of disappointments in the domain of work (low wages) and the wider social environment of the host society (discrimination and verbal abuse). Clinging to the allegedly superior morals of their home society as exemplified by the domesticity of their women served to preserve their sense of identity and self-esteem. To many women, being exposed to an alternative social system in which Malaysian women had privileges they desired for themselves, gave rise to a vocabulary and confidence that many had not had before. Their social space had increased.

Bangladeshi women were not unaffected by the domineering discourse within their (predominantly male) community that being a Bangladeshi migrant women equalled being ‘immoral’. Despite the fact that many of the women felt that they observed purdah and honoured their izzat, conflicts occurred on the level of self. First, many women were worried about how their community and society would perceive them upon their return. Second, some of the women were sometimes tor-
mented over their self-image, namely over what was ‘right’ and what was ‘wrong’ in light of their own sociocultural background. Although it might feel inherently right to do things in a certain ‘Malaysian’ way, public critique could suddenly fan internalized conventional Bangladeshi notions on appropriate behaviour for women and could lead to inner conflict, including the fear of God’s possible wrath. Third, anxiety and fear about how they would be perceived publicly, frequently led to an intense desire to present themselves to us as particularly chaste women. The extent to which the women were socioculturally embedded in Bangladeshi culture is exemplified by the fact that they too often perpetuated public discourse by criticizing women, hence reproducing social confinements imposed on them. Although many women strongly believed in self-determination and defined purdah as a ‘state of mind’, many were reluctant to grant to others the space they desired for themselves.

While inner conflicts over original versus newly acquired gendered perceptions did not disappear, they did seem to become less urgent over time. Many women knew what they wanted, and strategized towards this end. The decisions they made were the ones they found the most strategic and most satisfying. While keeping in mind the well-being of their families at home, they integrated into their new lives the opportunities offered by their new environment. Families at home were often missed, and for some it was painful to be so far away from those they trusted the most. In general, however, many of the women appreciated the enlarged space of self-determination and took pride in the social skills that they said they had acquired.

Courtship and marriage were particular examples in which Bangladeshi gender norms were renegotiated by the Bangladeshi women and men in Malaysia. While it worked out for several couples, courting entailed risks for women. If things went wrong they were severely stigmatized. In cases where things had not turned out as desired, men had left women, sometimes taking large amounts of their money. There were several factors at play: some were pressured by relatives to marry someone else; others did not respect the women as their equal, or regarded courting or marriage as an economic opportunity. Simultaneously, despite their general criticism of the dowry system many women had sought to ‘hook’ a man by giving him large amounts of money, not uncommonly against their better judgement.

The situation would likely have been a different one had remaining in Malaysia and becoming a Malaysian citizen been an option. It is unclear whether many of the Bangladeshi women would have stayed in Malaysia indefinitely, as several said they would like to do. Having this option would, however, have increased their perceptual fallback position: if things went wrong with family or husbands, they could have looked after themselves by living and working in Malaysia. This was no option under the current migration regime.

A justified question is: did going to another place lead to being in a different gendered space – or did migration turn out to be a mere transplantation of the own gendered discourse to another place? Going to Malaysia, in my opinion, was not merely a transplantation of Bangladeshi norms and values to a different environment. While the process of adjusting to a new life abroad was not easy for the women (the process was often characterized by struggle) and did not turn out well for everyone, it did give rise to new opportunities and experiences that in themselves
were often treasured. Despite strong social opposition, new avenues were carved out. As is generally the case during life-changing and intense events, many women felt that they had changed, grown, in some way or another. How this impacted their lives upon their return is looked into in the following chapter.