Working gendered boundaries: temporary migration experiences of Bangladeshi women in the Malaysian export industry from a multi-sited perspective
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CHAPTER 9: BACK IN BANGLADESH: A NEW BEGINNING?

This chapter focuses on the lives and situations of the Bangladeshi migrant women after their return to Bangladesh. Obvious questions concern whether and, if so, to what extent their goals had been achieved.

The study of return migration remains peripheral to migration studies (Guarnizo 1997:286). So far, in-depth research on returned migrant women’s lives in Asia has also been sparse. Most of the studies that have been undertaken specifically looked at the economic outcome of returned migrant women’s migration and are primarily based on surveys (cf. Chantavanich et al. 2001). As the findings in this chapter show, the migration effects can differ widely depending on a woman’s earnings, socio-economic background and individual decisions concerning the allocation of her wages. The general adverse perception of women’s migration (as well as of single women or female-headed households per se) pose challenges for many a returned migrant. While often huge, however, these challenges are not necessarily insurmountable. As seen in Chapter 5, economic incentives for migration cannot be seen in isolation from social incentives; they are interrelated. Migrant women’s economic desires are closely interlinked with social aspirations to safeguard their (and their children’s) future. Likewise, the effects of migration and the fulfilment of these goals are also interlinked. Instead of considering migration as either positive or negative, the data highlights the fact that the consequences of migration extend beyond the economic realm and are contingent on the contexts in which they are embedded (cf. Guarnizo 1997:287). In the case of returned Bangladeshi migrant women, the context was gendered.

As described in Chapter 4, I met in Bangladesh many of the women I had interviewed in Malaysia. In the same community in Dhaka, I also met a few other women returnees I had not seen in Malaysia.¹ In 2004, Farhana – my research assistant – revisited and interviewed several women; I joined her for some of these interviews. In 2006, Farhana once more conducted follow-up interviews with several of the women (see table 9.5 the end of this chapter). The findings presented in this chapter underline the importance of longitudinal in-depth studies on returned migrants. Here, I first look at the level and the allocation of remittances during women’s absence, and then turn to the investments some of the women made after their return. For analytical purposes, economic and social incentives and goals are discussed separately.

¹. It was beyond the scope of this study to also consistently collect data on returned migrant men in Bangladesh. It was time intensive to find and visit migrant women in their various villages and communities.
9.1 Remittances

Migrant workers’ remittances often serve to cover the costs of daily life that cannot be met through local activities. It is not always easy to evaluate the meaning and impact of remittances (Cohen 2005:103). Very few studies have disaggregated remittances by the sex of the remitters, let alone work towards a comprehensive gendered analysis (Mahler & Pessar 2006:44; King et al. 2006:409).

Generally speaking, every three or four months the women would send money home; mostly 10,000-20,000 takas (approximately 200-400 euros)\(^2\), depending on what they could afford.\(^3\) Most of the women sent their money via the informal hundi system, which is based on a network of middlemen and contact persons at both ends. Bangladeshis and other South Asian migrants all over Asia use this system. It is generally preferred over formal banking systems because it is fast, cheaper and trusted (Puri & Ritzema 1999:6; Bruyn & Kuddus 2005:31). While the study by Siddiqui (2000) found that migrant women generally claimed to use official channels (82%), our study came to different conclusions.

**Box 9.1: Nazma’s homecoming – I**

A sudden departure\(^4\)

Malaysia, April 2001: Nazma had been in Malaysia for 5 years; soon she would turn 23. The company\(^5\) had promised to keep her and her colleagues on for one more year – provided they passed the medical test. Six years was the maximum time they were allowed to employ temporary migrants. Nazma had resolved to stay for one more year as she needed to earn more money. She felt that her brother had wasted all the money she had sent him. He had not reacted to the angry, tape-recorded letter she had recently sent him. He had promised to buy some land in her name and now word had come to her that he had leased the land to obtain a visa for himself to go to Saudi Arabia – ‘Mind you,’ she said, ‘my land!’ She had told him to wait for her to settle things. He had not listened. Earlier, she had tried to get a visa for him to come to Malaysia, as he had asked her to. She had paid 2000 ringgits but had never got the visa. Her friend Rashid told her not to worry, that he would take care of it. But she was not so sure; it had also happened to others.

Nazma and her 31 Bangladeshi colleagues were relieved: the results of the medical exam had arrived. They had all passed and so would be able to stay on for one more year. The sense of relief, however, did not last very long. The following morning, ‘Madam’ – the human resources manager – called a meeting. She told them, with a grave expression on her face, that their

2. Approximately, 100 taka = 2 euro.
3. This section is largely based on the survey conducted in Malaysia.
4. Nazma’s story is exemplified in several boxes throughout this chapter. Farhana and I had set out to visit Nazma in her village, as we had heard of her expected return. We were in her village when she returned from 5 years in bidesh. For Nazma’s reasons for migration, see also 5.5: Getting away from marriage negotiations.
5. Factory II. For more information on factory II, see Chapter 7.
visas had not been renewed: the factory was not doing well and would have to close down within a few months. They could not believe it. This was impossible! Production had just started to pick up again! Nazma was as shocked as the others. They were not at all prepared to leave. Although they had been buying some goods and gifts to take back home, it was not nearly enough – nor was the amount of money they had saved! They had only 21 days to prepare for their departure. Relatives needed to be informed so they would be able to make arrangements to be picked up at the airport; they also needed to say goodbye and to purchase gifts. They cried for days, Nazma later told her aunt. There was nothing they could do about it; their time was up.

However, the factory did not close down: it remained operating for years to come. According to the women, the company had received a new batch of Indonesian workers, prior to the departure of the Bangladeshi women. They suspected that their early departure was linked to the arrival of the new women: Indonesian women were cheaper than Bangladeshi women since the latter had been receiving annual wage increases for the past 5 years.

The migrant women in Malaysia largely preferred this informal channel, as bank forms were said to be complicated, exchange rates lower and the fees high. Moreover, most of the relatives in villages in Bangladesh did not have a bank account. As other studies also found, the confidence established through knowing people face to face as compared to an anonymous banking system also played a crucial role, although there were still transaction costs (Siddiqui & Abrar 2001:v). We found that at times, and partly to cut down on costs, migrants trusted individuals to carry money or gold jewellery for them when they returned home; in several cases, however, these items were never delivered.

Most of the migrant women remitted most of their wages: on the one hand, it was needed back home, and on the other hand, many did not want to keep large amounts of money in their Malaysian bank accounts. It was not that they mistrusted Malaysian banks; on the contrary, once migrants were familiar with it, the computerized system was valued and most became comfortable using cash dispensers and the like. However, it was feared that if they were unexpectedly sent home, there might not be sufficient time or the chance to withdraw their savings. Although some women saved money in their Malaysian accounts, many felt more comfortable once the money was back in Bangladesh. Since they generally did not have their own bank accounts in Bangladesh, they sent their savings to their relatives.

At the time of the survey, the women had been in Malaysia for an average of 43 months and had remitted an average of 153,776 takas (3075 euros). Thus, the average monthly remittance was 3576 takas (72 euros) and the average annual remittance 42,912 takas (858 euros). Interestingly, Siddiqui (2000:67) in her survey amongst 200 returned migrant women and their families in Bangladesh came to a very similar annual figure, namely 45,126 takas.6

6. Siddiqui’s survey in Bangladesh was conducted at about the same time as our survey in Malaysia. The vast majority of the women in her survey had worked in the Middle East; less then a quarter had
Quite understandably, most women regarded these remittances as ‘profit’ only once the migration fee had been fully recouped. After deducting the costs of migration, at that point in time the women had sent 85,950 takas (1719 euros) in total – an average of only 1999 takas (40 euros) a month. It is not surprising that the women found this a disappointingly low amount: they had expected to be able to remit several thousand takas a month. By way of comparison, the average wage (wage, not savings) of a garment worker in the factories in Dhaka was about 1900 takas at the time (personal communications with garment workers).

In table 9.1 the figures on remittances are disaggregated by the factories that the women worked at. The figures reveal a stark difference in the value of remittances sent by women at the different factories. Although other variables may also be at play, I argue that this likely reflects the differences in wages between factories as discussed in Chapter 7. Factory 2 paid the lowest wages and, not surprisingly, the net remittances sent by the women working at that factory (635 takas) are by far the lowest.

While these figures largely explain why many migrant women who worked at factory 2 felt that their move to Malaysia was not very profitable, most of the women were able to save money.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factory</th>
<th>Products</th>
<th>Average number of months in Malaysia at time of survey</th>
<th>Average of the total amount of remittances sent per worker in taka</th>
<th>Average of the total net remittances sent per worker (minus migration fee paid)</th>
<th>Average remittance per worker per month in taka</th>
<th>Average net remittance per worker per month in taka</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factory I</td>
<td>Electronics components</td>
<td>34 (N=36)</td>
<td>134,666</td>
<td>68,148</td>
<td>3960</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory II</td>
<td>Electronics components + consumer electronics</td>
<td>41 (N=23)</td>
<td>89,113</td>
<td>26,068</td>
<td>2100</td>
<td>635</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory III</td>
<td>Branded high-quality garments</td>
<td>47 (N=45)</td>
<td>230,789</td>
<td>140,142</td>
<td>4910</td>
<td>2982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory IV</td>
<td>High-quality ladies underwear</td>
<td>49 (N=18)</td>
<td>173,461</td>
<td>129,792</td>
<td>3540</td>
<td>2649</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

been in Malaysia. Slightly more then half of the migrant women had worked as domestic helpers and 5% as nurses. The remaining 40% or so had worked in factories.

7. 87% of all the women interviewed worked in one of these four factories. The women who worked in other factories generally earned less than average.
The money was usually sent to a father, husband, mother, or close and trusted relative. In cases where the relationship with the husband was estranged, the money would be sent to the immediate family. Several women heard via letters from home that their remittances had been misused. This is a common problem reported by other migrant women in Asia (Gamburd 200:181). Whenever possible, women would send their remittances to other relatives; only a few kept the money in their own bank accounts.

### 9.2 Allocation of remittances

In the survey held in Malaysia, 57% of the women said that they knew how their remittances were spent by those back home, 25% said that they partially knew and 18% said that they did not know at all. Table 9.2 shows the different categories that the remittances were spent on. Some women knew the exact breakdown of the expenses, but as most did not, no amounts are given. In most cases a large part of the money was spent on daily expenditures, for example food, clothing and doctor’s bills. This was often referred to as the money that had been ‘eaten up’. It reflects the socio-economic situation of many migrant women’s households. This is in line with the allocation of remittances of female and male migrant workers in Asia in general (Eelens 1992; Puri & Ritzema 1999:10; Asis 2001; Chantavanich 2001; Cohen 2005). Siddiqui’s (2000:67) survey among the receivers of remittances from female migrants in Bangladesh, found that 56% of the remittances were spent on daily expenditures, healthcare and education. In our study we found that 59% of all women sent remittances for daily expenditures (see table 9.2).

Land was a popular investment (39% of all the women had invested in land), as were building or repairing a house (23%), educating children (23%) and investing in a family business (17%). The last-mentioned would mostly involve minor investments, such as buying poultry etc. In rare cases, investment implied buying or renting a shop. Of the women, 10% helped to finance the dowry and wedding of a sister or daughter, and 8% spent money on repaying debts. The contributions towards these specific ends does not always imply that the costs of the expenses needed for the specific transaction (e.g. buying a plot of land or paying for a sister’s dowry) were entirely covered by the respondent’s remittances; sometimes money was pooled from other income sources the family had access to. In a later section, a closer look is taken at the investments made and the objectives and implications of those investments.

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8. It is interesting to note that although several studies find that the relationships with husbands are said to be okay, a third of the women sent their savings to their parents (Asis 2001; Sukamdi 2001).

9. Siddiqui (200:67) found that of the total amount remitted, on average 3% was spent on land, 2% was invested in a business, 4% was used to send someone else to bidesh and 5% was spent on social ceremonies and dowries. Hence, although some could have invested quite a bit in these activities, on average the amounts spent on them were relatively low.
Table 9.2: Allocation of remittances

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spending of remittances</th>
<th>Number of women’s relatives who had allocated part of the remittances to this end</th>
<th>Percentage of women’s relatives who had allocated part of the remittances to this end</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily expenditures</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repairing/buying a house</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education children</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migration of other relatives</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family business purposes</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dowry for sisters or daughters</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repaying loans</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>95 women</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As mentioned, while many women knew how the money was spent, 25% knew only partly and 18% did not know. It was often said that they would ‘never ask’ what the money was spent on. However, it was also said that those back home would tell them what they had done with the money or would regularly ask for the migrant’s advice. The relative ignorance concerning the allocation of remittances seems to substantiate the dutiful daughter/altruistic mother argument. The data obtained regarding the decision-making process for the allocation of remittances seem to further support this argument, as table 9.3 shows.

Table 9.3: Decision making concerning the allocation of remittances

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision maker</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents, husband or brother</td>
<td>79 cases</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondents together with family members</td>
<td>23 cases</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent</td>
<td>12 cases</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone of the extended family</td>
<td>6 cases</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>120*</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 19 respondents were not asked questions related to the expenditure of their remittances

Of the women, 10% said that they had personally decided how remittances were spent, while 19% said that the decision making had been a joint effort. Hence, only 29% of the women seemed to have had some degree of say in the spending of the remittances. Siddiqui (2000:85) found that most women sent money home as they had no bank accounts of their own. Their families did not seem to think that the migrant women had first dibs on the money:

On the numerous occasions where the migrant women expressed an opinion how the money should be disposed of, their wishes were rarely honoured by their families. In many cases, the families used up their earnings by the time the women returned from abroad. (Ibid.)
Our study found that upon their return, many migrant women were disappointed at the way all or part of their remittances had been spent during their absence (see also Gamburd 2000:181). Many had not had a clear say on the allocation of their income while they had been away. The figures given in table 9.3, however, do not necessarily reflect powerlessness or passiveness in terms of deciding how the remittances were spent. Once more, the answers given regarding the decision-making power over remittances partly concealed the other aspects, motivations and dynamics that are at play.

First, some of the survey answers reflected socially correct notions and answers. Ideal-typically, a woman does not interfere in decisions about spending; this is part of the male domain. In practice, however, the dynamics can be very different. For example, in the survey, Nazma said that her elder brother decided on how remittances were spent and that she was being ‘informed’ about it. As her words in boxes 9.1 and 9.2 show, however, this was only part of the story. She had asked him to buy land in her name, and he had done so – but he later leased it out for his own benefit. She was understandably furious. Preliminary answers to the question regarding decision making on remittances partly seemed to reflect socioculturally correct behaviour. Remittances are a sensitive issue (cf. Mazzucato et al. 2005).

Second, a substantial part of the remittances had to be spent on daily expenditures and the needs of those left behind, as is the case with the remittances sent by male migrant workers. It should also be noted that most migrant men who were part of their father’s or elder brother’s household or extended household did not have much decision-making power over the remittances they sent either (personal communications with migrant men). Migrant women and men often wanted to ‘first do something for the family’: they wanted to make sure that they were provided for, before looking after themselves. Their drive to help their families was fuelled as much by feelings of caring as by feelings of responsibility.

Third, remitting large amounts to a guardian is often part of a conscious strategy to strengthen ties. Likewise, in a study among migrant men and women from rural Thailand, Vanwey (2004:754) found that remittances from women to their families were partly made to make up for the lack of social control their relatives had over them.

Fourth, not all of the money was sent. Although many had said in the survey that their fathers handled the money and they did not know exactly what had been bought, we later found that at some point women had stopped sending money in order to save more for themselves. Table 9.4 presents an estimate of the approximate amount of money women had left each month after deducting remittances and living costs. It should be noted that when their departure had approached, many women had ceased to send back money. Living costs were on average 150 ringgits per month. Many of those with low earnings, such as the women in factory 2, tried to spend less. Those who earned more, such as the women in factories 3 and 4, allowed themselves to live less frugally; they spent about 200 ringgits per month. Table 9.4 shows that women in factories 3 and 4 had more money at their disposal. For the women in factories 1 and 2, this was far less the case. Part of this money was spent
on buying gifts to give to relatives when they returned, widely perceived to be a social ‘must’.

Table 9.4: Monthly earnings, living costs and remittances (in ringgits)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factory</th>
<th>Average income*</th>
<th>Living costs</th>
<th>Average remittance per month</th>
<th>Net monthly earnings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factory 1</td>
<td>509</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>305 (3960 takas)</td>
<td>55 (715 takas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory 2</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>161 (2100 takas)</td>
<td>29 (337 takas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory 3</td>
<td>781</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>377 (4910 takas)</td>
<td>204 (2652 takas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory 4</td>
<td>584</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>272 (3540 takas)</td>
<td>112 (1456 takas)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* After deductions made by the company for EPF and the levy (see discussion in Chapter 7)

Table 9.4 shows that although the women who earned more sent larger sums, the remittances did not grow at the same pace as the wages. Those who earned more could keep a substantial part for themselves. Particularly the women in factories 3 and 4 bought things for themselves, including gold jewellery, clothing and mobile phones for their immediate use in Malaysia. They also occasionally treated themselves to Kentucky Fried Chicken, which is expensive in Malaysia but very popular among migrant women. There was also a group of women who had sent hardly any money home. To them, migration had been a way of ‘opting out’ from undesirable situations; many of their families did not need their money. They mostly spent their money as they deemed fit. Thus, even if the fee had not yet been repaid fully or loved ones had asked for more, these women spent money on things they wanted to do and have. In line with Wolf (1992), it can be concluded that migrant factory women do not earn just for their families, but also pursue their own desires. However, the women who earned less and came from families with dire needs generally lived as frugally as they could. Here, a study by Ishida and Hassan (2000:104) among Bangladeshi migrant men working in manufacturing in Malaysia can provide a comparison. The researchers calculated the men’s average monthly wages and average monthly remittances, namely 707 ringgits and 378 ringgits, respectively. The latter sum is slightly larger than the amount remitted by the women in this study who earned approximately the same wages.

Vanwey (2004:754) found in her study among migrants from rural Thailand that women were more altruistic than men in sending remittances. As was seen in our study, she also found that the remittances were larger when the income level of the household was lower. Men generally came from higher income families, relatively speaking, a fact that is probably related to the level of their remittances. More research is needed to understand patterns and the volume of remittances sent by male and female migrants.

10. When these figures were collected in the summer of 1999, the exchange rate was 1 ringgit = 13 takas.
Box 9.2: Nazma’s homecoming – II

On the plane back from Malaysia to Bangladesh, May 2001

The final few days in Malaysia had been extremely hectic and all the women had been tense. Everybody had way too much to bring back. Nazma had been anxious about the money she had to pay for her excess baggage – a couple of hundred ringgits. She had a big suitcase, a medium-size suitcase, two big boxes, a sports bag and a bag containing two blankets – one for herself and one for her mother. Her last month’s wage had been eaten up by the excess baggage charge.

On the plane, her mind drifted away. She felt miserable. She was worried. Rashid, the man who had helped her find an agent, had told her on the phone not to worry. He had paid 2000 ringgits to the agent. He promised he’d take care of it and get the money back. She liked Rashid; he’d been really nice ever since she met him. He was smart. They had talked so much about all her worries and anxieties; it had been such a relief. Their friendship had grown. One day he had said that he wanted to marry her. To prove his interest in her he had introduced her to his two uncles, who lived in Malaysia. But she was no longer so sure about his feelings. She wondered if he really would marry her; he had lied to her about several other things. Would she ever get her money back? Her heart ached. She was angry with him and perhaps with herself, too. How could she have trusted him? Once again, she decided she needed to be independent and earn money for herself.

She had been trying to contact Rashid for days. He had said that he was busy but would come to see her before she left and would pay back her money then. He never showed up. Finally, the day before, she had gone to his house to look for him. His room-mate told her that he was not in. He said that Rashid did not plan to give her the money back. He wanted to be sure that she would wait for him and not marry someone else before he returned to Bangladesh. This made her even more upset. Worst of all, he had not even come to say goodbye to her; it hurt. He would stay in Malaysia until December. Would he really come to her village to marry her, as he had promised? Her mind wandered to thoughts of her village. Had they received her letter and be waiting for her at the airport? She hoped so: she had so much luggage. She had tried to call the shopkeeper near her aunt’s house, but had not managed to get through.

The square in front of Dhaka airport was filled with people. One by one, her colleagues spotted their families in the crowd; tears of joy flowed. Nazma’s family was not there. She tried unsuccessfully to hold back her tears. She had tried to call the shopkeeper near her aunt’s house, but had not managed to get through. The square in front of Dhaka airport was filled with people. One by one, her colleagues spotted their families in the crowd; tears of joy flowed. Nazma’s family was not there. She tried unsuccessfully to hold back her tears. The scene changed quickly as more and more people arrived and help Nazma off the rickshaw. They set off, her luggage barely fitting on the rickshaw.

Being back in the familiar countryside made her feel peculiar. A wave of panic swept over her; she tried to relax by thinking of her plans to find a good job. She needed to find a job in the city. She needed to take care of herself, so her relatives will not marry her off. But first she needed to see her mother.

The neighbours’ children were the first to see her. ‘She’s arrived!’ they shouted. ‘She’s arrived!’ Her aunt came running, along with her brother. The scene changed quickly as more and more people arrived and help Nazma off the rickshaw. Then she saw her mother slowly approaching her through the crowd. Nazma was startled: her mother looked so old and frail.
After the first hellos had been said and her luggage had been carried into the mud house, Nazma made her way through the crowd. She burst into tears. Why hadn’t anybody picked her up at the airport? She was the only one alone! Her aunt [her father’s sister], an astute and influential woman who lived next door, tried to comfort her. They had been waiting for her phone call; it all had been a misunderstanding.

Several hours later, Nazma sat down with her mother and aunt to eat dinner. She complained about the rice being hard and the water having a strange taste. Her aunt tried to soothe her. ‘You have been away for five years,’ she said. ‘You will need some time to get used to things here.’

Earlier, Nazma had walked around the home, inspecting the place. She was concerned by what she had seen. Nothing had improved; in fact, it had deteriorated. The house had not been well kept; there were cracks in the earth walls. Several of the old trees had been cut down and the cows and goats were gone; there were hardly any chickens left either. Her brother had sold it all in order to buy his visa. ‘We used to have 10 cows, 18 goats and several valuable trees worth 10,000 takas each,’ she told us. Why hadn’t her brothers been working the land properly? She had asked her youngest brother: why had Jamal, her older brother, left for bidesh? He had left 28 days earlier. ‘He was just stubborn,’ her younger brother replied. Now the news had come from Saudi Arabia that he was stranded: the agent had cheated him and it was likely that he would be sent home any day now. It was such a disaster! He had wasted 200,000 takas!

All in all, Nazma had sent 190,000 takas to her family. Some money had been used to pay off her loan, and the rest had been used on daily expenditures and to buy land – her land, which was now largely leased out. She figured that her brother had also paid for his second marriage with her money. When she first heard that he was wasting her money, she began sending it to her sister. However, her sister had passed it on to her brother, she had just learnt. Her sister’s rationale had been that if he spent it properly, she would be able to get back the money she had lent him earlier. Nazma felt it had all been wasted: she had hardly any savings left. If only she had not given the money to Rashid! And then there was the 30,000 takas she had lost last year when someone claimed they would bring the money back home for her… ‘How could I have trusted them all?’ she thought. ‘My fortune is bad!’ she told her mother. ‘I tried hard to develop myself but I did not succeed.’

9.3 Money and gender

The discussion in the previous section was largely based on the data we collected while the women were still in Malaysia. In Bangladesh we aimed to amend this data. Although we thought that this process would be relatively straightforward, it turned out to be a daunting task: after several conversations and informal interviews with individual women and their relatives concerning remittances, investments, losses and savings, it became clear that the figures given often differed from conversation to conversation, depending on the context of the story told. Nevertheless, the figures presented in the previous sections give important indications regarding earnings, remittances and, to some extent, decision making and the allocation of remittances, especially since other researchers came to similar findings (Siddiqui 2001; Ishida & Hassan 2000). However, there is more to the money issue.
There are several underlying reasons for the partiality and fluctuations in the figures and ‘money stories’ told. First, on a practical level, not all the women noted the exact amounts of money spent or sent. Jewellery, goods and gifts were bought whenever there was some money left over; later, it was not always easy to calculate the total costs. Second, some women did not want to reveal exact figures or they wanted to make things seem better or worse, depending on the context. At times, giving ‘incorrect’ or incomplete figures was due to feelings of shame and embarrassment: the respondent had lost a lot of money by making a mistake or an unwise investment. At other times, overestimating or underestimating a figure served to underline a point a woman was trying to make, thus ‘proving’ her position vis-à-vis someone or a goal she had in mind. The symbolic value of the figure given often proved to be more important than the actual one. In other instances, the stories told were those that were socially preferred or regarded as safe and appropriate. This was sometimes related to the fact that there were other people – relatives, neighbours and/or children – listening to the conversation.11

Similar to the point made in Chapter 5 concerning women’s motivations for migration, respondents were not necessarily lying but presenting themselves in ways that made the most sense to them. This was not surprising, given the social sensitivity of the topic. Money is not an uncharged, neutral variable; the partial or inconsistent representations regarding money issues are culturally and socially embedded. Our study found that the allocation of the migration revenues – or women’s decision-making power (or lack thereof) over such revenues – is intrinsically linked to women’s social goals and gendered room to manoeuvre. We were only marginally successful in establishing the women’s exact expenditures, losses and investments, but it was more interesting and important to understand the dynamics that were at stake, namely the motivations and the obstacles faced concerning the allocation of the money earned in bidesh.

In order to obtain their general goal of securing their futures, the migrant women tried to improve their relative bargaining power (their voice) and their fallback position (their long-term security) by strategically allocating their foreign revenues. As discussed in Chapter 2, the strength of a person’s fallback position is regarded as being of particular importance in determining his or her relative bargaining power (Sen 1990). According to Agarwal (1994:62), a person’s fallback position can be defined as that person’s ‘outside options’ to ensure survival and well-being in the case of adversity or disagreements. Factors that determine a person’s fallback position include private ownership and control over such assets as land; access to employment and other income-earning means; access to external social support systems; and access to support from the state or NGOs. Someone’s relative bargaining power is revealed not only by who participates in decision making and who does not, but also by the content of the negotiations. More fundamentally, relative bargaining power is revealed by the interests the outcome of a decision represents (Sen

11. As discussed in Chapter 4, a lot of patience and creativity was often needed on our part to get to talk to someone privately without being rude, and we did not always manage to do so.
Hence, establishing someone’s bargaining position and identifying the factors that determine the outcome of bargaining is a complex process. Using the notion of fallback position in a pragmatic way by looking at migrant women’s allocations of their earnings can be very revealing.

In the Bangladeshi context, a woman’s support of a trustworthy guardian is a pivotal asset and improves her fallback position considerably. Financial contributions or investments were often made in order to ensure the continued protection and support of a guardian and to improve the woman’s fallback position. The power of Bangladeshi women is generally dependent on access to resources as well as male support (Gardner 1994; Kabeer 2000; Hadi 2001).
The allocation of migrant women’s remittances can be summarized as follows:

**Economic goals**

- Paying for daily necessities (incl. loans)
- Buying land/building a house
- Income-generating investments
- Investing in children’s future
- Gifts and consumer goods
- Personal savings
- Human investments

Women’s social goals, which are often intrinsically related to the allocation of remittances and savings, can be summarized as follows:

**Social goals**

**Marriage:**
- A respectable marriage: - A groom of one’s choice (love)
  - Being economically prosperous
  - Having children
  - Having in-laws one gets along with

  or:
  - A respectable life as a single woman: -being socio-economically independent of husband/ex-husband or relatives

**Children:**
- Living with one’s children and being able to provide for them
- Ensuring a bright future for them

**Enlarged Sociocultural Space:**
- Increased decision-making power regarding one’s own life
- Sociocultural room to generate an income

**Social prestige:**
- Being well-respected in the family and the community (social and symbolic capital)

Each of these aspects is discussed below. Women clearly had a determining say in the actual decision making concerning these investments. Although economic and social goals and investments made towards this end are intrinsically linked, for analytical purposes they are discussed separately. By discussing the economic parameters and women’s incentives, the gendered aspects that are closely related to women’s social objectives become clear.
9.4 Economic aspirations: financial investments made

In Malaysia, 43% of the women had expressed interest in setting up a business upon their return. Their ideas ranged from buying a sewing machine and working as an independent tailor from home, to opening a shop or starting a poultry farm. Most of the women wanted to buy land and, if possible, build a house. A few had the additional aspiration to buy a car. About 13% of the women, mostly widowed mothers, primarily wanted to invest in their children’s education and future marriages. The prime goal of another 13% of the women was to enable a son, brother or husband to go to bidesh. Some had added that they were not sure that these economic aspirations could be fulfilled, given their meagre earnings. Below, a closer look is taken at all the categories the women had spent their money on. Information regarding the various periods in which the data were collected and a summary of the main findings are given in table 9.5 at the end of this chapter.

Investing in land

Bangladeshi migrant workers consider land to be the most sustainable investment: land is scarce and its value continues to increase (Mahmood 1996; Siddiqui 2001:69). Ten of the twenty-nine women we visited in Bangladesh had invested part of their money in land. The women had bought land for various reasons, often in order to build a new house. In five cases it also served as an income-generating investment for rice production.

Owning land is also a way for a woman to increase her personal fallback position and long-term security. For this to happen, the land needs to be in the woman’s own name. Eight of the women had land registered in their name.12 The story of Nazma (box 9.2) illustrates that even if land had been bought in a woman’s name, ‘guardians’ could still have power over it. Generally, however, owning land confirms a woman’s position and increases her bargaining power. For example, Comla (a married woman) had only agreed to come home after her husband had promised to put the land in her name. Comla:

It is a good thing that I now have land in my own name. This land and the house are mine. It’s in my name and nobody can throw me out. Now I can throw people out. So now I have become stronger.

It should be noted, however, that many of the women who had wanted to buy land did not achieve their goal. Many had not earned enough, while others had lost money as a result of earlier decisions or had had their remittances misused. These issues are discussed in a later section. As table 9.5 shows, for most women there was a correlation between buying land and building a house.

12. We were not sure of the situation for the two other women who had land.
Building a house

Building a house in the home country is an important goal for many migrant workers worldwide. Migration studies often cite the luxurious two- or three-storey buildings surrounded by big fences that can be found in remote villages in Morocco, China, the Philippines and elsewhere. Apart from providing shelter and comfortable living conditions, these constructions often display their owners’ success, and hence are symbols of migrants’ success, of their upward social and economic mobility (Garder 1994; Mahmood 1996; de Haas 2003).

Asian migrant women’s remittances are often invested in housing (Chantavanich 2001; Sukamdi 2001; Siddiqui 2001; Gamburd 2000; INSTRAW 2000). Given their moderate level of earnings, the houses they build or extend are often more modest and serve practical purposes, as is also the case for many intra-Asian male migrant workers. Seven of the ten women who had bought land also built a house on it.13 Five other women had built or rebuilt a house or extra rooms in their fathers’ compounds. The reasons for building houses varied according to the women’s personal situations. For five of the women, buying land and building a house provided a possibility to live away from relatives they had been dependent on – siblings, uncles, aunts or husbands with whom they did not have a good relationship.14 Having a house meant that they not only had a home for themselves and thus some personal ‘space’, but also that they lived in a ‘place’ outside the dominion of their relatives, which increased their self-reliance and independence – an important goal for these women.

For three of these women,15 and for three others who built on their relatives’ land, building a house or adding rooms was an investment: the house or rooms could be sublet to tenants or rented out as shops. The investment in these buildings was a source of income. Two other women had extended or rebuilt their houses mainly because they wanted more comfort and space. For all of the women, investing in houses was a way to increase their fallback position. The buildings were valuable assets that were theirs, whether or not they were shared with others. This was particularly topical for five of the women: they had built houses on the land of their fathers or siblings so that they would have a place to return to if their marriages turned sour.16 Apart from wanting to improve their relatives’ living and income situation, building a house in their families’ compounds was thus also a strategic move.

Shannaz’s case is a good example of this. She had married Kamal shortly after her return from Malaysia; they had met in Malaysia. Although her family was not too happy about her marriage (he had been married before), they consented to it. She

13. In a few cases, costs and hence ownership were shared with other family members.
14. One woman (Nahar) was unmarried, two (Shazeda and Hashida) were divorced and two (Hameeda and Salma) were married. Salma’s husband later joined her; they were not estranged.
15. Hashida, Nahar and Shazeeda.
16. Although it is custom that women can return to their parental homes and, under Islamic law, also have an inheritance right, many women feel that these options are not sufficient, as the experiences of the divorced women exemplify (see also discussion in Chapter 5).
was about to move to her husband’s village, which was in another district. She told us that she had explained to her husband that she had built the house because her father was poor and it was her duty, since he had helped her to go to bidesh. When we were discussing her house again at a later point in time, she exclaimed:

Can’t you understand why I built a house? It is my security! I do not need to pay for this land. I am also a daughter; I also have a right to this land. So I built a house. My brother will never be able to throw me out if I need to come home. He will say ‘My sister built this house’.

Although her relationship with her husband was good and based on mutual respect, Shannaz felt cautious and a need to secure her position. In an earlier marriage, she had not been treated well. When she had returned home from this first marriage, she had felt the unspoken accusation of her siblings. It was then that she had decided to go to Malaysia. She had owned nothing and felt that she was a burden on her family. As Shannaz explained, she had been determined to prevent this from happening again. If need be, she would be able to return to her family without being ‘a beggar’.

Shannaz and the other women felt that giving all or some of their money to their husbands would not necessarily give them any guarantees; having an asset at their parental homes, however, improved their fallback position. As one woman put it: ‘A husband is like a roof.’ Women knew from ample experiences that this roof might collapse at any time and was an incentive for them to build a ‘roof’ of their own. Men were not always happy about the investments made by their wives-to-be. The women, however, perceived their potential husbands’ acceptance of the matter as one way of ‘testing’ his genuine intentions about her; that is showing that he was not just marrying her for her money.

The houses the women built were usually simple two-room brick constructions. Building these houses was often a struggle. Women building their own houses are a relative novelty; gendered social confines frustrated them and hijacked their endeavours. Although several women actively helped in the construction of their houses, and at times also dealt with contractors or builders, they generally depended on a male guardian to make the arrangements. This was due to the sociocultural norm that women are not supposed to deal with unrelated men. Women who break this norm are often not taken seriously or are cheated. In several cases, obtaining the help of guardians was not a problem; guardians took charge of these affairs. In other cases, however, this process led to tense situations: women were unhappy with the little support they felt they received and the lack of agency they had in dealing with matters directly. Some guardians who helped out expected to gain financially from it, as Nahar’s experience shows (see her story in box 9.4). Female-headed households are often dependent on male mediators and guardians, and are therefore vulnerable to fraud (White 1992:112; Hadi 2001:60).

Hashida, a divorced woman, experienced this vulnerability. She had had a good income in Malaysia. She did not want to ever marry again and was determined to be self-reliant. Her brothers were upset with her: they felt that they had a right to their sister’s earnings based on their blood ties. One had wanted her to give him 200,000
takas to go to the Middle East; the other had wanted her to buy him a car. Hashida refused. She did not see why she had to give her hard-earned money to her ‘lazy brothers’. She was determined to make sustainable investments (in her own name) instead of frivolously spending it on her brothers. This led to considerable tension and quarrels within the family. Hashida agreed to a joint project from which her brother would also profit. They bought land and built a house in a respectable area not far from their village. They would rent out some rooms and the shop space; her brother, a madrasa (religious school) teacher, would live there. Hashida saw it as an investment. She was not sure where she would live. However, the process was tedious and marked by many quarrels during which Hashida was pressured to spend more of her money than she had planned. In the months to come, her family would often blame her for being ‘selfish’ and Hashida felt increasingly socially isolated. Nevertheless, when we visited Hashida at the construction site in 2001, the house was coming along and Hashida was proud. She asked Farhana to take a photo and told me to show it to her peers in Malaysia, if I happened to go back. She had succeeded: ‘I’ve always said I will build a house – and here it is!’ A broad smile crossed her face.

*Income-generating investments*

As migration studies have variously shown, a large percentage of migrants worldwide aspire to save their earnings to invest in business (Puri & Ritzema, 1999; INSTRAW 2000; Asis 2001). However, as many studies also show, remittances are mostly spent on household expenditures and durable consumption goods. Generally, not much is left for ‘productive investments’ or income-generating activities – much to the dismay of migrant sending governments (Puri & Ritzema 1999:10; Cohen 2005).

Eleven women invested their money in a way that generated an income; other women had failed to invest successfully. One reason was the level of savings. Many of the women who had made successful investments had left for Malaysia in 1993/4, long before the economic crisis started and wages dropped dramatically. During these earlier years, the migration fees had also been substantially lower. These women had stayed up to six years in Malaysia, had worked in factories with overtime and were paid relatively well. Upon their return they had managed to save (or had remitted) 300,000-400,000 takas (6000-8000 euros).

The level of wages was only one reason for the women’s failure to invest successfully. A lack of knowledge and less well-chosen investment projects also limited the possibilities. There is an urgent need for migrants to receive institutionalized assistance regarding investments. Migrant workers who have no prior business experience cannot be expected to become dynamic entrepreneurs overnight (Puri & Ritzema 1999:16; Siddiqui & Abrar 2001; de Bruyn & Kuddus 2005:46).

The investments made include renting out rooms or shop space, setting up a tailoring business, investing in poultry or other animals, cultivating the land they had obtained, investing in public transport (such as rickshaws and, in one case, a bus), lending money and/or living off interest, and investing in migration fees for sons.
Six women were able to earn some income from renting out a few rooms or a shop. Fahima had brought her sister, Shuli, to Malaysia after she had been there for a year. With her remittances and those of her sister, she had built five small, corrugated-iron houses in her father’s compound. By renting them out, the family earned 2500 takas a month – a welcome addition to the meagre 500 takas wage their father earned in a nearby textile mill. Fahima recalled that she felt ‘like a son’ to her parents. Apart from ensuring that her parents were now well provided for, they had secured their fallback position for when she and her sister would marry and leave their parental home. Five of the women cultivated the land they had purchased; the rice they harvested was sold at the local market and this added to their income. Although most women did not know their exact revenues (or would not disclose them at the time), they appeared to be modest but worthwhile.

Two women invested in raising animals. Comla, who was married, bought a 50,000-taka Australian high-yield milk cow. Half the cost was financed by the money she had brought back, and half by borrowing money from a micro-credit programme. She took care of the cow while her husband went to the market every day to sell the milk. They earned up to 6000 takas a month. Comla was well on her way to paying off her loan and expanding her little farm through more micro-credit financing. Without the micro-credit programme and the support and cooperation of her husband, she would not have been able to start this business.17

Helena, a divorced woman, had invested her savings in buying three rickshaws, which she rented out. The business thrived, and she lived well from the proceeds. While still abroad, Salma Helena had invested some money in her father’s rickshaw repair shop. The business went well and she shared in the profit. Additionally, Salma Helena and Sariswati – two friends who had gone to Malaysia together – each invested several tens of thousands of takas in a tailor shop in order to produce trousers for the local market. However, the business did not take off and they lost all their money.

Three women had invested money in sending their sons to the Middle East or Singapore. They had lost 80,000, 120,000 and 200,000 takas, respectively. In one case, the son never left and the agent did not reimburse the fee; the two others had been sent back shortly after their arrival due to problems with the agent or employer.18 Losing money this way is certainly not unusual for male migrants either.19

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17. Micro-credit programmes have been criticized for imposing high interest rates and the difficulties faced by many poor families in paying off the loans, as much as they have been applauded for generating an income for women (Schuler & Hashemi 1993; Kabeer 1998). Comla managed to succeed because she had accumulated some capital from her migration and her husband had a regular income. Their daily needs were met, and thus the loan could be paid off. Some of the other women in her village who had been partaking in the micro-credit programme were struggling. As Comla recalled, their economic situation was bad and they partly lived from the loan itself and hence had more trouble paying it off.

18. Another woman, Moream, lost all her savings of 60,000 s plus a 30,000 taka loan on a fee paid for her own migration to the Middle East. The trip never materialized. Nahar also lost 11,000 takas this way; she changed her mind in the process and decided she did not want to go.

19. Six other Bangladeshi women we knew in Malaysia had lost money (40,000-200,000 takas each) to an agent while trying to send a male relative abroad.
Some investments – such as those made by the three women to send their sons to bidesh – may be considered risky or misinformed. However, there are other reasons why some investments did not turn out to be entirely successful. At times, failure was simply a result of bad luck; more frequently, however, the women’s endeavours were hindered by sociocultural norms and values. In some cases, the community or male guardians did not approve of the women’s successful endeavours, leading to a sense of social isolation that affected the women socially, emotionally and economically. In other cases, the women’s ongoing and troubled relations with men who had more socio-economic power than they had influenced their decisions concerning income-generating activities. The stories of some of the women illustrate both aspects.

Hashida and Leyla were the exceptions in terms of the amount of money they had at their disposal upon their return, namely about 400,000 takas each. Both women received interest on the money they had put in the bank. Additionally, Leyla had bought land that she now cultivated and she also became a money-lender in the neighbourhood in Dhaka where she lived; this provided a considerable source of income. Leyla’s neighbours considered her a well-off woman, and rightfully so. However, neither she nor her neighbours considered her migration to have brought her success, accomplishment or social prestige. She was viewed negatively for ‘breaking her family’; three of her four children had gone off track while she was abroad. Around 2004, she started running a liquor shop (an illegal business) from her home in the slum she lived in. Although she did not seem to need the money, she evidently felt that the customers who came to her shop at night helped to relieve her social isolation. In 2005, she spent a few months in jail, as she had been caught carrying bottles of liquor in her neighbourhood. By 2006, she had resumed the liquor business at her house.

As for Hashida, she derived income from the house described in the previous section and had 200,000 takas in the bank. She explained that she preferred not to work any more; she let the money do the ‘work’ and lived on the interest. Yet, her life still was not peaceful. She had been back for a few years and her relatives continued putting pressure on her for money; her social isolation had increased. Eventually, she sold the house to her brother and moved in with her mother. Hashida told Nahar: ‘I thought that having money would bring an end to my problems. But it did not at all.’

In 2002, Hashida used all her money to buy a minibus for public transport. This seemed a little surprising, because it entailed a certain risk and seemed impulsive and unlike Hashida. After some months of operating, the bus was involved in a fatal accident and ended up a total loss. Hashida had lost all her money. She became ill. It seemed that she had given up on life. Her mother said later that Hashida had become ‘a little crazy’ towards the end of her life. On her deathbed, Hashida cried: ‘Send me a man, any man – I want to marry now!’ For all those years, Hashida had tried to make it on her own with the money she had earned, yet she had never gained the social respect she had desired in order to live her life peacefully. She died in her mid thirties feeling that if only she had had a husband, people would have treated her respectfully.
Shazeda had set up a little tea stall in her neighbourhood in Dhaka. Business initially went well, but since her husband was violent and took her earnings from her, it made little sense to continue this business. Later, in 2004, she too started a liquor shop, a somewhat surprising decision given the illicit character of this business and her pious and upright personality, for which she was obviously respected in the neighbourhood. She explained that she felt that she did not have a choice, as her husband was living with his third wife and was not contributing to her household; money was scarce. Additionally, she had to repay Leyla the 40,000 takas she had borrowed to pay an agent to go to bidesh again, a trip that never materialized. With the revenues from the liquor shop, she had paid off the loan by 2007. She continued the business.

Nahar (see boxes 9.4 and 9.5) was unmarried and lived with her younger brother in a house she had built in a village. As a source of income, she had started her own tailoring shop. An NGO that had given her training in pattern making allowed her to buy a sewing machine in instalments. Business initially went well. However, after a few months the middleman who provided the material started making advances; he wanted to marry her. Her guardian (the village schoolmaster) and the NGO had to interfere to stop his increasingly aggressive moves. The harassment stopped but she had to give up her business, and thus lost her income. The pressure on her to get married increased; finally, she agreed to marry a man her guardian had introduced her to.

Living in a sociocultural context in which not everyone respects women as equals with individual income-generating aspirations and capacities poses challenges to women who aspire to make their own living. The reasons for the failure of business ventures are frequently gendered. Because the women do not live up to sociocultural expectations, they are faced with social resistance and hurdles. Not uncommonly, relatives feel that they have a natural right to the earnings of ‘their’ women (see also Siddiqui 2001). Some women’s agency is actively limited by men who wield their social power over them; some women eventually succumb. Hashida died trying to gain acceptance.

However sad Hashida’s life may have been, her experiences did not signify failure. To her peers and to other women of various backgrounds in Bangladesh who heard her story, Hashida was a symbol, a courageous woman who against all odds had been determined to better her own life, and had not been discouraged by the sociocultural fabric or prepared to remain in the shadow of men. The fact that she had managed to earn a huge amount of money and make investments of her own choosing despite being pressured, was a great encouragement to others. Her life was regarded as an example, as a sign that things were changing, albeit slowly. Her situation at her death exemplifies the challenges ahead, yet her life speaks of hope. Her experiences and the successful income-generating experiences of several other women, however few, show that migrant women can benefit economically from migrating, all the while carving out the sociocultural space to do so, often with the help of supportive men in their lives.
Aiming to improve their children’s future

For five of the eleven women who had children, improving their children’s future had been the most important reason to migrate. The plans of three of the women did not materialize the way they had envisioned; one woman had achieved her goals, while the situation of the fifth woman was unclear.

One reason for earning money in bidesh was to save money for their daughter’s marriage. Two women managed to do so. Two others failed as their savings had been insufficient or had been lost through another failed initiative. Mothers had also wanted to invest in their children’s education. Educational achievements, however, generally did not proceed as envisioned. Most children had not felt compelled to continue their education the way their mothers had wanted and had dropped out of school (cf. Asis, Huang & Yeoh 2004:205). Most of the children were living in extended households. In two cases, it became clear that the daughters were expected to do a large part of the household chores in their mothers’ absence, and sometimes they were fed less than the other children of the household whose mothers were around. These girls had dropped out of school not because they did not like school or were ‘disobedient’, but because they could not cope with the school pressures plus the workload at home.

Interpersonal dynamics between those who had left and those who had stayed (e.g. between different wives or sisters-in-law) led to situations in which children, both boys and girls, were regularly confronted with derogatory talk about their mothers’ migrations. Some of the children were told that their mother had gone to bidesh to have sex with other men. This attitude made it increasingly difficult for children to cope with their mothers’ absence (cf. Parreñas 2005:335).

The mothers told us that some children had gone astray while their mothers were abroad. Leyla’s story is a case in point. As seen in the previous section, she had earned well in bidesh and had desired to brighten her children’s futures. She had left out of frustration with the economic performance and ‘simple-mindedness’ of her husband. She was business-minded and a firm believer in the power of education, and she wanted to improve the prospects of her four children. Each month she had sent additional money for tuition fees. However, when she returned she found that all four of them had dropped out of school long before her return. No-one had informed her; the remittances might have stopped had they told her. Both daughters had married men of their own choice. One son had become a ganja smoker and an alcoholic, while the other one had raped a young girl and was being sued by her family. By 2006, both sons had become drug addicts, and the second one was in prison. One daughter was happily married to an educated man; the other daughter was in a troubled marriage. Leyla’s investments had not paid off. She was personally blamed for the situation of her children.

Consumer goods, gifts and demands by others

Migrant workers all over the world spend a large proportion of their earnings on consumer goods and gifts. They are expected to bring back trophies of their econo-
mic success, namely luxury and consumer goods such as TVs, audio players, VCRs, fans, kitchen machines, gold jewellery and other gifts. The pressure to bring back these goods is particularly troublesome for those whose earnings are meagre. Yet the symbolic value of these goods is considerable: they symbolize people’s dreams of the affluent and ‘developed’ bidesh – images that are constructed by the media, movies and advertisements, and perpetuated by the stories of returned migrants. They are symbols of modernity and distinguish those who have migrated from those who have not (Gardner 1993:11). The consumer goods testify to a person’s success abroad, or alternatively, to a person’s failure and loss of face if he or she returns empty-handed.

Rahman (2000:6) calls these purchases by Bangladeshi migrants ‘honour goods’. The social pressure to bring back these ‘modern’ items cannot be underestimated (cf. Gamburd 2000:237). Migrants feel that their success is rated according to what they bring back, which in turn has a considerable impact on their social standing and prestige. These goods are bought with ‘easy money’, so the myth goes. While both male and female migrants take pleasure and pride in bringing back some of these goods, doing so often seriously depletes their resources.

Hardly anyone we knew had left Malaysia without the obligatory TV and VCR, regardless of whether or not there was electricity in their village. When asked, it was said that they were of better quality than the ones that are available in Bangladesh. Even if the quality was not better, the social value surely was (cf. Gardner 1993:12). While hard to estimate, the amount of money spent on consumer goods generally corresponded to several months’ pay. Additionally, as seen in the story of Nazma (see box 9.3), hundreds of ringgits were spent on taxes and excess baggage charges, and she was by no means an exception. Yet the migrants themselves perpetuate this pressure to bring large amounts of gifts and consumer goods through their actions.

Although most of the studies that refer to this phenomenon studied male migrants, it is no different for female migrants. Sukamdi (2001:120) found that for Indonesian returned migrant women, buying electrical goods had a higher priority than investing in capital goods. Perera (INSTRAW/IOM 2000:140) maintains that for Sri Lankan returned migrant women, the improvement of their quality of life brought about by the ownership of such items is felt to be ‘empowering’; it makes the housekeeping and cooking easier. She argues that although the money spent on these items is non-productive, it can have a positive impact on a woman’s social prestige. Although this is undoubtedly the case for some, for many it does not seem to lead to a significant advance in their position (cf. Brochman 1992; Eelens 1995; Gamburd 2000).

Nazma’s story highlights the high expectations that people have of receiving gifts. Some women brought little back, as they had not had much money left over. This was often felt to be shameful. For example, in order to appease her relatives, one woman told them that she had bought gold jewellery worth 60,000 takas, but that it had been stolen a few days before she had returned home – a story that she had fabricated. A few of the women we met had not brought back many items, as they simply had not seen the point. In retrospect, many of the women wished that they had saved some money instead of spending it all on presents and consumer goods.
Hashida was one of the women who had brought back few consumer items and gifts. When we left Hashida’s house in 2001, her friend Nahar said to us: ‘Hashida was smart. She did not bring many things back; she came back rich. I brought so many gifts and ended up paying so much tax. Now I am broke and yet no-one is helping me.’

An important function of the goods and gifts brought back is to fulfil social expectations and gain symbolic value in terms of enhancing the returnee’s prestige. While the gifts may reinforce the returnee’s relationship with the recipient and hence strengthen the former’s fallback position, it is not guaranteed to do so – as Nahar and many others found out. Although bringing back certain gifts and goods also gives the migrants pleasure (and the personal value of that cannot be ignored), most women and men had succumbed to the social pressure of bringing consumer goods to demonstrate their economic success (cf. Mazzucato et al 2006:1064).

For oneself: gold and savings

The most valuable items that the women brought back for themselves were pieces of gold jewellery, as Nazma’s aunt had pointed out. Gold is seen as an asset of long-term value. The amount of gold one brought back was a very private issue that was shared with only a few trusted family members, as seen in Nazma’s case. The amount spent on gold ranged from 10,000 to 60,000 takas, depending on the woman’s earnings and savings.20 It is important to note that this was an investment made for the woman’s own benefit. Gold is highly valued and desired by Bangladeshi women. Apart from its material value, it has a social and symbolic value, particularly but by no means exclusively when getting married. Many women seem to feel more ‘womanly’ by owning gold jewellery, and they derive a feeling of status and prestige from it. It enhances and confirms their femininity. While buying gold is often seen as being a way of investing money for times of crisis, for the Bangladeshi women gold is not primarily an asset to sell when needed. When asked, women will generally exclaim: ‘I will never sell my gold!’ Yet, some have to when their need becomes dire. Its economic value cannot be denied and it also strengthens women’s fallback positions. For those who intended to marry after their return, jewellery enhanced their ‘worth’, as highlighted by the words of Nazma’s aunt.

Box 9.3: Nazma’s homecoming – IV

Unpacking the gifts and goods brought back: a public event

The next morning – Nazma’s first full day back in the village – her elder sister arrived and the crowd of neighbours, relatives and children returned: Nazma would be unpacking and distributing gifts, the event everybody had anxiously been waiting for. Nazma felt uncomfortable

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20. Nahar and Pori seemed to be two exceptions. Each had brought back gold worth approximately 80,000 takas.
and defiant. ‘There’s not much really,’ she said, but the onlookers ignored her comments. ‘Why should I have to give anything to those who never tried to help me?’ she angrily murmured to her aunt. Earlier, Nazma had sent saris for her sisters, material to make clothes for the children, a golden necklace for her mother and prayer mats for her brothers. She had then decided not to bring much more for them: there were so many of them and she really couldn’t afford it. Having been given such short notice of their return, there had not been enough time to save more money to buy gifts. She had bought 24 bars of soap and several hairpins to distribute.

While she unpacked the soap, her sister admired a silver-coloured teapot and tray that Nazma had just unpacked. ‘But Nazma,’ she said, ‘you don’t even have a showcase to display it in.’ Her aunt reacted quickly: ‘Nazma will soon have an armoire,’ she replied, putting the teapot back on the table. Two unfamiliar men were hanging around; they were looked at with suspicion. They were questioned, then sent away: nobody had seen them before and the number of thefts had increased in recent years, especially from households to which migrants had returned. The house of Hamid, whose son was in Singapore, had been robbed the previous month. Nazma had unpacked the valuable items after the blinds had been closed the night before. She had of course brought some electronic goods: a blender, a cassette deck and a rice boiler that she had purchased the previous year. These she would keep for herself. The rice boiler is a National and the tape player a Sony, she explained. They are quality brands, incomparable with the local Bangladeshi brands, she said. At the time there was no electricity in the village.

When it became evident that there was nothing else to display, the spectators began to drift off. Nazma’s eldest sister talked about her daughter, Ferdousi (Nazma’s niece), who had got married 18 months previously. She had recently delivered her first baby. Nazma smiled, thinking about her favourite niece. Her sister invited her to come over. Nazma’s face clouded and she declined the invitation. She later told us that she was too embarrassed and ashamed to see her niece and her husband, because she was still unmarried.

The night before, after the blinds had been closed, Nazma had shown her mother and aunt the gold jewellery she had brought back: three rings, a necklace and two bangles. They had cost her about 20,000 takas. Her aunt and her cousin sister had admired the jewellery. ‘This is the best thing that you brought back,’ her aunt had said. ‘You are very clever. You will need this for your marriage. Who will provide it otherwise? Your brothers won’t.’ Nazma had nodded, and for now she tried to avoid the ‘marriage’ topic. But she had also realized that with her brother leaving and the family having no resources, her marriage chances were bleak.

Some of the women had managed to keep a little money for themselves, usually somewhere between a couple of thousand and tens of thousands of takas, which they kept in the bank. For example, Nazma had 30,000 takas when she returned from bidesh. This was not talked about; when her interests differed from those of other household members, information was kept from them. Nazma knew that she would need some money to go back and forth to Dhaka to find employment, or perhaps to bribe her way into a job or to use for her marriage to Rashid. If the worst came to the worst, she would need it as a down payment to go to bidesh again.

It is common knowledge that Bangladeshi women try to save something for difficult times or unexpected events or demands. In the villages, for example, women
often take a handful of uncooked rice from a day’s supply and put it aside (personal communications). Also, many women who work in garment factories in Bangladesh are known to save part of their money in their bank accounts and fix it for ten years, or pay monthly into life insurance schemes (Amin 1998; Khundker 2001). Salma Helena and Sariswati used to work in the garment industry before migrating and had such accounts: instead of taking the money out when times were tough, they tried to continue paying into it and only withdrew money in times of severe crisis. Although the amounts were small, they had kept some money aside for life after their return from bidesh, but generally not enough to support them for long if not further supplemented.

Money that was lost or wasted

The earnings that are retrospectively considered lost or wasted are often conspicuously absent from studies on migration. As seen above, money was sometimes lost through failed investments. Yet there were other sources of loss, namely the money that a woman might allocate differently could she do it again. It is worth focusing on these expenditures for two reasons. First, considerable amounts of money were often involved. Second, these investments were closely related to larger social goals, and the losses were intrinsically gendered. Many of the women we met referred to a part of their earnings as being ‘lost’. These amounts were spent or lost while still in Malaysia or after coming back to Bangladesh. The reasons and sources differed.

First, while in Malaysia, three migrant women had each lost gold jewellery worth 30,000-40,000 takas by entrusting it to a friend to take back to their relatives (see table 9.5). The valuables were never delivered, since they had been ‘stolen’ on the way. These experiences were not isolated cases; we heard many similar stories while in Malaysia.

Second, six women referred to the way their remittances had been invested without their approval as wasted and lost. Just like Nazma’s situation with her brother, three married women had discovered upon their return that their husbands had not allocated the money as instructed. For example, Shazeda’s husband had a good income of his own and she had asked him to buy land and build some houses with her money. Instead he had spent it on alcohol. Members of the community confirmed this information. Other husbands who were confronted with accusations of

21. Here I refer only to actual earnings and remittances, not to the wages migrants would have been entitled to.

22. Another category of losses of a somewhat different nature was related to circumstances in Malaysia. As seen in Chapter 7, many migrants had spent as much as 30,000-65,000 takas for new visas and passports in order to secure employment when they faced or feared dismissal and being sent home. Whereas migrants were not forced to do so, they felt inclined to secure their stay and paid large amounts of money towards this end. Also, it was not uncommon for migrants to be robbed by gangs, or forced to bribe police officers who misused their power. These losses could be considered to be beyond their immediate control, given that they was determined to be able to stay longer in Malaysia.
misusing the money said in their defence that they had had to keep the household running and take care of the children. While this certainly holds some truth, it is common for migrant women to find that their wishes regarding the allocation of their earnings have not been honoured (Gamburd 2000; Siddiqui 2001). When the women had realized that their money was being misused, they often started sending it to a sister or mother instead. While this worked for several women, it was not always foolproof, as Nazma’s story shows. When we asked what the women would do differently if they were to go to bidesh again, many said that they would send money to a trusted person and also open a personal bank account. It should be noted that migrant men saw themselves confronted with similar problems (personal communications with migrant men).

Third, a significant amount of money was lost as a result of it being entrusted to fiancés or husbands while still in Malaysia, as seen in Chapter 8. The reasons for entrusting money to others varied from emergencies in someone’s family or investing in a business, to the need for a new visa or passport to stay on in bidesh. Of the women we met in Bangladesh, at least seven had provided or lent money to men while in Malaysia. As can be seen in table 9.5, the lost sums were often large (50,000-100,000 takas). The contributions made to these men were generally seen as an investment in their common future. If, for example, the money was for a fee to enable the man to stay in Malaysia, it was regarded as a way to ensure that the relationship would endure and that the man would not be married off to someone else upon his return to Bangladesh. The men usually promised to pay back the money. Sometimes, however, the money was used for entirely different purposes, such as to enable a man to migrate to another country. Some of the women who gave money to their potential husbands had explicitly told us that they disapprove of the dowry system, and had said that they did not want to get married with a dowry. Paradoxically, these investments often appeared similar to dowry payments: the women’s underlying reason for making them was often partly induced by wanting to strengthen their position vis-à-vis the men. In cases where the marriage took place and the relationship continued, these investments were soon forgotten and certainly not regarded as a loss: the women had gained through their marriage, which for them had been an important goal.

Unfortunately, all too often these relationships did not work out; the money was not returned and the investments became acute losses. This was the case for six of the seven women we met in Bangladesh who lost money (see table 1). One woman, Salma Helena, did end up marrying her fiancé, yet the money spent on a business idea of her husband remained lost. The cultural given in Bangladesh that a woman needs to pay for her marriage, namely her dowry, has been internalized to such an extent that some men found it easy to ask for money from women, who in turn were willing to lend them money. At the same time, some women had naively trusted men while chasing their dreams.

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23. Nahar lost even more (200,000 takas). See her story in boxes 4 and 5.
Some women felt that they had been too trusting. Nahar is a case in point (see box 9.4). All in all, she had lost several hundred thousand takas. Her story exemplifies different ways of losing money, the various dynamics at stake and the sociocultural, gendered embeddedness of her decisions. How could women as smart and strong as Nahar or Nazma trust men who were not entirely committed to them? Some women were very young. Nahar was 19 at the time and had encountered quite a bit hardship. ‘These men are very skilled in sweet-talking and saying soft things,’ some women remarked, explaining the infatuations of their girlfriends and colleagues. Going back to Bangladesh alone — she did not have a real family to return to — frightened Nahar. She craved affection and a secure future, as did other women, and having a husband was an indispensable part of that dream. Relatives would pressure them to marry. While some women’s decisions appeared romantic or overly naive, they were partly responding to internalized social norms and rules concerning marriage.

Box 9.4: Nahar’s story - I

Nahar was 22 when she returned to Bangladesh after five years in Malaysia. She had earned exceptionally good money in Malaysia: not only had she worked for a ‘good’ company, but she was known to be the fastest sewer and had thus earned more than anybody else, thanks to the piece-work system. The desire to do something for her mother, whose health had deteriorated and who was badly treated by her husband, had motivated her to go to bidesh. Her mother had not wanted her to go: she was so young — only 17! Yet she left, determined to change their common fate. Initially she had transferred money to her mother’s bank account. She also had sent jewellery to her on two occasions. The second time, however, it was lost: a female friend had promised to deliver jewellery worth 25,000 takas to her home, but she never turned up. Then Nahar’s mother unexpectedly died. Nahar was devastated. Her mother had never wanted her to go. Her father, with whom she had a strained relationship, took over of his deceased wife’s bank account. Nahar never heard from him again. She had lost 200,000 takas to her father.

Months later, and still grieving, she noticed a young Bangladeshi man — Abdul — in the factory. She was very shy, yet she agreed to talk to him over the phone. She thought he was smart and aloof, yet friendly. They mainly talked over the phone. He said he wanted to marry her, and she was very happy. But, he first wanted to earn more money in a Western country, where wages were higher. Meanwhile, rumours were going round that he was seeing an Indonesian woman. Nahar confronted him, but he said it was all nonsense. She agreed to let him borrow money to go to Australia, and gave him 42,000 takas. It all went horribly wrong and within months Abdul was back in Malaysia, doing odd jobs. He then wanted to go to Italy instead. The fee was even higher. Again Nahar paid for him. It was an awful lot of money, as Nahar said. She had sworn never to tell anybody how much, not even her aunt who had asked her many times. After five years, Nahar decided it was time to go home. She had worked in garments factories in Dhaka since she was 13 and was tired. In Bangladesh she went to live with her aunt in Dhaka, who was relatively well off. There was no-one else to turn to now that her mother had died and her father had broken with the family. Her younger sister had married while she was away and her brother was roaming around. Her aunt had been writing her letters, and she was happy to go there.
In the beginning it was nice. Her aunt helped her to buy a plot of land outside Dhaka. On a visit there, however, she found that her aunt had been dishonest: she had charged her a lot more than what the land was worth. Slowly, things went sour. Nahar decided she had to leave her aunt’s house. But where could she stay? Abdul had not told her when he would return. She had called him twice. He only told her to make sure she did not get married to anyone else. She talked to his room-mate, who told her that Abdul was now with a Nepali woman. Nahar feared the worst. Impulsively, she decided it would be best to go to bidesh again.

She contacted an agent who would send her to Saudi Arabia and paid 11,000 takas in advance. But she felt weary; she did not want to leave again. After all, she was glad to be home. She decided to stay in the village where she had bought the plot of land. That was rather uncommon, as she had no relatives there, but she wanted to get away from Dhaka; it was too busy for her taste. While in the village with her aunt, she had met a schoolmaster, who had been friendly and well respected in the village. She went to him, told him all about her situation and asked him for his protection and guardianship. She had impressed him, and he was sympathetic to this pious woman who was covered head to toe in a black burka. He agreed to help her build a house on her plot of land and offered her protection.

The house was built with an adjacent room that was rented out for a few hundred takas a month. By the time she moved in, however, she had run out of money. The house had cost her a tremendous amount. Some had said that she had been ‘stupid’, that the costs could easily have been 40,000-50,000 takas less than what she had paid the schoolmaster. But what could she have done, she thought? Without the help of the schoolmaster she would surely not have been able to build a house there and, more importantly, have a guardian in the village. How could she have possibly lived there? Everybody in the village knew that she was under the protection of the schoolmaster, so they were good to her and left her alone. Nahar was very content to have her own house and felt safe and happy in the village. There was still no news from Abdul – and there never would be, she realized. Nahar’s 14-year-old brother moved in with her. She earned some money by renting out the other room, but it was far from enough to live on. Although she had not wanted to, Nahar returned to work in a garment factory.

9.5 Fulfilling women’s social migration aspirations

As seen in Chapter 5, issues related to the institution of marriage and related notions of appropriate roles and behaviour for women played a predominant role in the women’s migration decisions in one way or another. The three different scenarios are discussed in the following sections, namely women who aspired to marry, women who wanted to avoid marriage and women who had escaped, at least temporarily, from their marital struggles.

Women who aspired to marry

Of the 29 returnees we had met in Malaysia, 18 desired or had desired to get married. Twelve of them married, while six did not (see table 9.5). Of the 12 who fulfilled their wish, 8 appeared to be in stable relationships and were genuinely content over-
all, while one was miserable and three were in situations that were not settled when we last met them. This last group of women were rather anxious. All but three of the women had married men they had known in Malaysia. In the case of the women who married men who had not been abroad, their guardians had taken a proactive role in their marriage arrangements. However, the women had had an important say in choosing their husbands.

As table 9.5 shows, four of the six single women who eventually married had been single before migrating. Two women’s desire to marry was not fulfilled during the time of the study. Five of the seven divorced women who had wanted to remarry did so. Three of them appeared content and in stable relationships; their in-laws had accepted them. One marriage appeared to be rather unstable: the bride had not yet been introduced to her in-laws and was anxious. When we met her again in 2004, she had just moved to her husband’s village. By 2006, she and her husband had two daughters and were still together. As for the third woman, we were not able to get a full impression as she had only just returned from Malaysia.

Three of the ten married women had divorced and had remarried or were intending to do so. One had divorced her abusive husband and married a man of her own choice in Malaysia. Upon their return to Bangladesh, he moved in with her and her family; the relatives who had opposed the situation at first had finally accepted it. The couple felt content. Another woman had divorced and now lived with her new husband but was rather unhappy: she was a second wife and the situation was tense. The third woman did not get to marry the man of her choice upon her return, as her children were against it.

Of the three widowed women, two wanted to remarry. One had got married in Malaysia several years before returning, but when she returned to Bangladesh, the husband denied being married to her. The other woman had also got married in Malaysia. Her husband was still abroad when we spoke to her, and it was unclear what would happen upon his return. She, too, was rather anxious.

Although we met most of these women on many different occasions, we were not able to follow up on all of them as frequently and over as extended of a period of time as was the case with others. The data therefore reflect the situation only at certain points in time. As seen in the case of Nahar, if one evaluates her situation in 2001, one might be inclined to assess her situation as dire and her goals as largely unfulfilled. However, by 2004 and 2006, her situation was rather different; the changes that came about are to an important degree still related to her migration (see box 9.5). Thus, as 12 women out of 18 had married someone they had wanted to marry, a relatively high percentage (67%) had managed to fulfil their goals.

Some studies on both male and female Bangladeshi migrants found that dowries in households that had a family member working overseas were higher (Gardner 1994; Siddiqui 2001). Our study came to similar conclusions for cases in which dowries were paid. Because of the presumed financial status attached to returned migrants perhaps in combination with the alleged loss of social status, dowry demands were higher for returned migrant women. A mother-in-law of a returned migrant woman we met in one village stated: ‘A returned migrant woman is never unmarried for long.’ Her son was married to a returned migrant woman of a lower
status. Part of the dowry of 100,000 takas was used to pay the migration fee to send the son (the newly wedded husband) to Saudi Arabia. It was ‘sort of a business’, the mother-in-law explained. As seen in Chapter 8, many women had feared that dowry demands would be exorbitant upon their return for these very reasons; their worries had not been unfounded. This is one reason why many chose to find a husband on their own.

‘Available’ women who were known to have come back economically successful were not short of suitors. Many proposals were made but the dowry demands were high – and at times outrageously so, as Nahar and Layla both recalled, with men asking for motorcycles and large amounts of money.

Layla had never wanted to marry or meet a man in Malaysia: upon her return, she would marry a man chosen by her and her family. Suitors were in ample supply, yet the dowries demanded were unaffordable. For more than a year, the issue caused much tension in Layla’s family. She eventually married one of her earliest suitors; her first choice. Her in-law’s had not agreed initially, because the dowry offered was considered to be too low. The potential groom’s family was better off than Layla’s family. There were two spacious brick houses in the man’s family compound and they owned four shops. Layla’s brief work experience before she had left for bidesh to work in a garment factory was disapproved of (only the main negotiators knew that she had been in bidesh). Moreover, she could not read the Koran, which reflected her ‘poor education’. However, Layla was determined to marry this particular man. In Malaysia, her friend Batashi, a trained teacher, had encouraged Layla to practise her reading and writing skills. Despite her limited education, Layla spoke better English than any of the other women. With the help of Batashi, she had improved her reading and writing skills, which had given a boost to her self-esteem. In the midst of the marriage negotiations, she persevered and taught herself to read the Koran. Meanwhile, her sister – who was still working in Malaysia – topped up the dowry funds a little.

Finally, after a year, a settlement was reached and they could marry. The groom liked Layla and the mother-in-law was impressed with Layla’s achievements and perseverance. Besides, Layla was considered beautiful, as she was fair skinned and being ‘fair’ is often equated with being ‘good’ (Rozario 2002:43). It appeared that her determination and trust in herself – skills that she had further developed in Malaysia – had played a crucial role in the marriage negotiations. As for the mother-in-law, who was the pivotal person in terms of the decision making regarding her son’s marriage, she was not entirely altruistic and simply giving in. The other potential marriage candidate was a cousin sister. The mother-in-law explained to me that it would be more difficult to rule over her. Since they are relatives, the woman could complain to her family and then there would be problems. She would not have this problem with Layla, who was not a relative and was from a lower status family. This is not uncommon reasoning. However, having said that, although my impressions are limited to a few visits, Layla seemed truly happy; she was glowing and felt lucky to be with her husband.

Money that had been saved while abroad could help to pay for a better dowry. In some instances, it also guaranteed a certain level of social and financial independen-
ce to pursue a ‘love’ marriage (cf. Gamburd 2000:239). In the cases where women had chosen their own grooms, the families of both the women and the men often did not approve of ‘love’ marriages. Although some families interfered and stopped the marriage from taking place, others eventually consented.

Farhana’s story is exemplifying. She had met Faruk in Malaysia. The whole community could see that this was a relationship based on ‘true love’. Despite her young age, Farhana had been appointed as a leader in her factory. She spoke English and was well respected among the women for her kindness and wise advice. Farhana came from a simple background and had been sent to bidesh to pay off her parents’ debts, while Faruk was from a middle-class background. Due to illness, Farhana left Malaysia earlier than planned. Faruk had bought the obligatory TV for her to take back for her relatives, as she had no money left because of the high medical bills. They stayed in touch. Faruk came to marry her when he returned to Bangladesh a year and a half later. In the meantime, she had continued her studies and passed her SSC exam, a prerequisite for her to be accepted by Faruk’s family. She had managed to convince her father not to promise her to anyone else yet. Farhana was brought to her in-law’s family and was soon accepted. Faruk had been politically active before he went to bidesh, and his family had feared that his life was at risk. The woman who had ‘changed’ him was welcomed by the family. For both of them, the migration experience had ended well, despite all the hardships and the fact that Farhana had not been able to send much money back.

Others, such as Hameeda, were less fortunate. Hameeda’s friend Rashid was going to marry her. This was one of the very few other couples who had a relationship that everybody in Malaysia, friend or foe, agreed would last. He was a ‘good’ man; he loved her and they were both very pious. However, the marriage did not materialize. Rashid and a few of his relatives visited Hameeda’s family after her return. His relatives did not approve: her family’s social standing was too low, as were her educational level and the dowry. Rashid’s family did not seem to take into account that Hameeda had paid more than 50,000 takas to help Rashid obtain a new passport when he had found himself in trouble. Rashid did not return to her village and the marriage was called off. Some of her relatives blamed her and rumours about her were circulated in the community. Two years later, she had to search for a job in Dhaka. The migration experience for her had not ended well.

There are no clear-cut answers to the question why it worked out for some and not for others. In the case of Hameeda, the fact that she had been married before, however briefly, is likely to have played a major role. Relatives usually make inquiries in the community, and negative accounts, whether or not factual, have an influence. Husbands-to-be were under a lot of sociocultural pressure as well. Some could persevere more easily than others. The women who had been married before often saw their marriage aspirations unfulfilled, either because the potential husband did not keep his promise or his relatives did not approve of the marriage. The social ideal of a ‘pure’ woman is strong in Bangladesh and often goes hand in hand with disapproval and less respectful behaviour towards women who have been married before.

Although sociocultural norms and the unequal position of women played a notable role, they are not the only reasons why the desired marriages did not take place.
For some of the women, the relationship had never seemed viable in the eyes of those witnessing it – colleagues as well as us. Some women lost money and the relationships were strained; the intentions of the men appeared questionable. It is beyond the scope of this study to venture into the field of psychology. Yet, some women seemed drawn to men and situations with familiar patterns of abuse. For example, the type of man Nahar described as her ‘ideal husband’ is 5-6 years older than her, so he would command respect, and he is not only smart but also moody and angry, so that in a quarrel he would win and things would be settled. These criteria largely reflected the qualities of her father, who had mistreated her mother – which had been the main reason for her migration. The label also fit Abdul, who had cheated her out of more than 200,000 takas. Nahar, as seen from her story, eventually broke the pattern. She carved out a way to remain single, to take care of herself; only then did she agree to get married to someone of her own liking. Not everyone, however, was able to break the pattern. More research into this issue is needed.

In short, many attached a substantial value to marriage, as it was regarded as an important prerequisite for a stable and happy future. Salma Helena’s words are exemplifying. She had lost 100,000 takas to her fiancé, who had failed to set up a business with the money. Her family had been doubtful about the marriage and resented the fact that she had sent less money back during the last years of her migration. Salma Helena was a little worried about their financial situation and the money lost. Yet she said with a big smile: ‘Sure, I don’t have any money, but I have a husband! Isn’t that true?’ To her, her migration had succeeded: she was happily married.

**Box 9.5: Nahar’s story - II**

Nahar, who had worked in a garment factory before, had taken on a garment job once more; her savings had run out. She got up at 4.30 a.m. to cook for herself and her brother. By 7.00 she was on a bus heading to the factory. There was compulsory overtime work everyday until 10 p.m. Nahar usually returned home around 11 p.m. After bathing, doing her laundry, then cooking and eating it was usually 1 a.m. before she got to bed. The next morning she was up again at 4.30. She was off work on Sundays, but occasionally had to do overtime on Sundays too. She earned 2000-2400 takas a month, just enough for her and her brother to get by on.

We visited Nahar on Sunday afternoons. Over the span of a few months, we could see Nahar’s health deteriorate (cf. Karim & Khan 1995; Khundker 2001). She was exhausted, had gastritis and was increasingly anxious; this was not the future she had envisioned for herself. Nahar had wanted to be a tailor and work from home, but she could not make patterns. With the help of a small NGO, the opportunity arose to take part in a course to learn this trade. At the end of the course, she would receive a sewing machine and would be provided with cloth and assistance to start her own tailoring business. Nahar jumped at the opportunity.

24. As a researcher it was difficult at times not being able to assist. It was not my role to interfere, not that I had the means or power to do so. However, Farhana and I decided to help two of the women to achieve their goals. We found the NGO and got them in touch with one another. The outcome as described in this box also reminded us of the complexity of the situation.
To begin with, the business went well. However, after a few months the middleman who provided her with materials started making advances. He wanted to marry her and his approach became increasingly aggressive. Her guardian (the village schoolmaster) and the NGO had to interfere. Consequently, she had to quit her business. The pressure on Nahar to marry increased after this incident. So far, Nahar had refused to marry. Requests came but often included large dowries and were from men she had no interest in marrying. Eventually, when she could no longer refuse, the schoolmaster introduced her to a young man who met her approval. While the marriage negotiations were in process, Nahar told him all her stories; she wanted him to know about her and her life before their marriage so that there would be no surprises. They got married. By 2004 Nahar had a two-year-old son and was visibly happily married to a bus driver, a quiet man who was respectful of her. By 2006, Nahar had resumed part-time tailoring from home and made an extra 1000 takas a month. Their marital relation was stable. When the marriage negotiations had been taking place, the schoolmaster had said, ‘Nahar has everything she needs, she doesn’t need anything any more’ – hinting at the land and the house Nahar had. The husband came from a different village and moved in with her. This had made her position stronger. Yes, there were little fights, she recalled. For example, one time he wanted to watch cricket on TV while she wanted to see a Hindi movie. She had strong feelings for this man, much to her own surprise, she said laughing. Nahar was obviously content with the way things had turned out.

**Women who did not want to remarry**

As seen in Chapter 5, several women wanted to migrate to escape the social pressure to marry. For those women who were unmarried or divorced and considered to still be of marriageable age, marriage was seen as inevitable – and they knew it. Going to Malaysia was often a way to temporarily postpone marriage. Some of the women who knew they could not avoid marriage sought partners of their own choice; others continued wishing that they could remain single.

Batashi, a former schoolteacher, had left for Malaysia because she had been severely abused by her husband in the few months that she was married to him. She had enjoyed her stay abroad; it had taken her mind off her pain and had given her a sense of self-determination. Moreover, since her family was well off she did not need to worry about sending money back. She returned to Bangladesh prematurely at the request of her father, following the negative publicity about women who worked in Malaysia. Back in Bangladesh, she enrolled in computer training; she would have liked to pursue work in this field. However, her father and her two brothers, both of whom lived and worked in Europe, were concerned about the family’s prestige and wanted her to marry. When we visited Batashi in her village, she said: ‘I never wanted to marry again in my life. But when I saw my father’s face and they were pushing me, I agreed. Apart from that reason, I hate men.’ By then, she had quit her course, got married and was five months’ pregnant. Nevertheless, while she did not see her desire to remain unmarried fulfilled, she felt her migration had had a positive impact on her life. The ‘time out’ it had given her had healed some of her
wounds and she held fond memories of her life in Malaysia. Moreover, although Batashi ultimately seemed to have lost out to the pressure her male family members based on prevalent gender roles and notions of prestige, her determination had not been in vain.

Batashi set preconditions for the marriage-to-be and hence was able to carve out a more secure and satisfying future. She did not want to be vulnerable again to abuse, as she had been in the in-laws’ house during her first marriage. Her father said that she could remain in the household; the groom would have to move in with them, living with her parents instead of her having to go to his family. Her father built a house for the couple and the husband moved in – the dowry had been substantial. Although Batashi did not seem to be happy in her marriage, she felt secure and content to be in her family’s home. The migration experience and her determination to go in the first place, notwithstanding her brothers’ opposition, had improved her sense of self as well as her negotiating power: her relatives now know that she does what she says she will do. Batashi also stood up to her husband and he listened to her. Of course, the fact that the economic situation of the family was good played a role, as did the love the father has for his daughter: when talking about his daughter, it transpired that he was pained by her suffering and wanted to accommodate her as much as he felt he could. His sons pressured him to have her married.

Four of the divorced or widowed returnees did not get married again and did not want to. Hashida was one of these women. However, she came to realize that her decision had made her life a lot more difficult, as seen earlier. While sometimes still pressured by relatives, these women were no longer considered to be marriageable, given their age, physique and children. Moreover, their families lacked the money for a dowry.

Marital struggles

Another reason for migration, as seen in Chapter 5, was to escape unhappy marital relationships. Of the ten women we met in Bangladesh who had been married before migration, four had left because they were frustrated with the economic performance of their husbands. Four others had left because of marital struggles or abuse. Of the four women who had left out of frustration with their husband’s economic performance and had been determined to better their economic situation, three were successful. Two of them also saw their marriages improve.

Comla had bought land in her own name and invested in a milk cow (see her story in the section on investments). While she felt that her migration was a failure due to its adverse effect on her children, her relationship with her husband had improved since her return. Women are largely defined through their family roles as wives and mothers. Many men feel a loss of self-respect and dignity when their wives take over as the breadwinner (cf. Gamburd 2000:193), and many may harbour a certain level

25. These were in line with her perceptions on her life in Malaysia when we talked to her while she was still living there.
of shame or emasculation. While Comla’s husband had been strongly opposed to his wife’s migration, even to the point of trying to stop her by calling the police, he had finally come around. He appreciated his wife’s business skills and respected her. Together they made her investment in the milk cow work. Her husband went to the market every day to sell the milk, and Comla had put a vested effort into the partnership. Both had become milder and more appreciative of one another. They also did not fight any more the way they used to, she said.

An improvement in marital relations did not always occur. Leyla—who, as described earlier, was very successful abroad and had bought land and became a money-lender after her return—continued to have an increasingly troubled relationship with her husband. She had wanted to marry someone else, but her children prevented her from doing so. Meanwhile, the couple continued to live in the same house in the slum, both bitter, both talking abusively about one another, yet not divorcing. Despite the conflict, Leyla felt she needed a husband, and her husband, despite feeling bitter, appreciated her money.

The fourth woman who had left out of economic frustration with her husband as well as abuse, Ferdousi, divorced him while in Malaysia (see also section 5.5: married women, and section 8.5).

Her ex-husband, who had also come to Malaysia, had stopped chasing and harassing her when she remarried. Upon their return to Bangladesh, the newly-weds moved in with her parents; everyone appeared to have accepted the new situation.

Generally speaking, we found that the four women who had left out of economic frustration and with a determination to change their economic situation, had been more successful in fulfilling their goals than the four women who had left due to heartache or abusive marriages. Of the four women who had migrated to get away from marital conflict and abuse, only one had saved and then invested some of her money in land and found more peace. Fahima, for example, like Ferdousi, had divorced her husband and married again. Her new situation was not satisfying, however, as she was a second wife, was not well treated by the extended family and was looked down upon in the village. She had returned from Malaysia with little money. She was anxious about her situation and her future seemed unclear. Her husband, who was also visibly weighed down by the domestic struggles, told us that he planned to go to bidesh again. He was trying to temporarily escape from the situation.

For the other two women who had migrated because of marital abuse and frustration (Shazeda and Parul), little had changed; if anything the situation had worsened. Both women had remitted money to their husbands and shared most of what they had brought back with them.

Apart from the confining socio-economic structures, which made it difficult for women to separate from their husbands and live dignified and protected lives, emotional attachment sometimes played a role in the perpetuation of marital struggles. Shazeda’s story is one example. She is the first wife to Hashid and had gone to Malaysia as she could no longer bear the emotional pain and abuse inflicted by her
husband. She went with Laizu, Hashid’s second wife; they both opted out.26 Shazeda returned after two years when news came to her of her daughter having conceived a baby boy. When she came back, her husband had been kind to her, and she thought that their marriage had been rekindled. It had improved only temporarily, however. While Shazeda and the second wife were in Malaysia, Rashid had married a third wife.

Several other women we met had found that their husbands had married new wives in their absence. Other studies in Asia have had similar findings (cf. Gamburd 2000; Zontini 2004:1134). Shazeda’s husband was thus no exception. After the money Shazeda had brought back had been spent, she recalled, things returned to how they had been before her departure. Rashid moved back to the third wife and only sporadically supported Shazeda and her three children. Shazeda was depressed about the situation and regretted that she had sent her money to her husband. She explained that divorce was not an option, as she would have even ‘bigger social problems’. She needed a man to provide protection and prestige. Shazeda: ‘All men know how little a woman can do. They know what she can do, and they know that a woman needs a man.’

We had first met Shazeda in her little shack in 1999.27 Overall, her situation in 2006 was not much different from what it had been when we first met her. Her husband mostly lived separately and Shazeda suffered from it; occasionally he was violent. Apart from the economic tightness of her situation and physical abuse, Shazeda often hinted at the pain that her husband’s emotional and physical neglect inflicted on her. She continued to long for her husband’s acknowledgement and affection. His rejection hurt her deeply. Her emotional attachment to her husband appeared to be as much of a reason for continuing her marriage as the sociocultural need to have a husband, which she claimed to be the reason for still welcoming her husband in her house.

Over the years, Shazeda had often contemplated or planned another migration. When things were particularly bad – after her husband had been over and had beaten her and her daughter – then talk and activities concerning migration intensified. For years, she had kept her bag packed at all times, ready for a sudden departure to bidesh. The agent had been paid 90,000 takas. Migration remained an idea, a way to opt out, however elusive. Her departure was postponed, not only because the agent had no visa, but also because in her heart, as we sensed, she did not really want to leave.

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26. See also section 5.5: married women, for an account on her decision making to migrate.
27. The dynamics were very different from those in the countryside, where I would always attract a lot of attention. People here got used to my presence very quickly. When we went to Moream’s house, we would often sit on the floor in a corner while everything continued just the way it had: cooking, chatting with neighbours, discussing the latest developments with the recruitment agent, fights, you name it – it all went on. Often, this did not lead to answers to particular questions I might have had in mind that day. However, it created an amazing wealth of insights into the situation and migration dynamics of these returned and aspiring migrant women.
When Shazeda gave up the idea of going to bidesh, the third wife of her husband showed interest in the visa. Laizu, the second wife, had just returned from Malaysia and was receiving all of the husband’s attention—and would do so for as long as the money lasted, as Shazeda knew from experience. The third wife wanted to go to bidesh and make her own money; she had also been beaten and said she was fed up. Things were secretly arranged. The day after she should have left, we visited Shazeda. The third wife had not left for the airport. The husband had found out about her plans, beaten her up and locked her in the house. That was the end of all migration plans. While the husband had at first welcomed the economic benefits of his wives’ migrations, he had changed his mind. All this bidesh stuff led to disobedient wives and gave him a headache. The money for the fee was lost.

Shazeda continued making a living from her liquor store, as explained earlier. Sometimes much of the earnings were ‘wasted’ by the husband, who came and drank the alcohol without paying for it. Marital struggles continued. Yet, with her income and that of her daughter and son-in-law, they managed well financially.

In short, some returnees had carved out new or more harmonious marriages for themselves. This applies especially to those who had wanted to become more economically independent: their determination had steered them towards decisions that had resulted in profitable investments. Others remained unhappy in their marriages. Through the grapevine among the returned women, we regularly heard stories about women who remained dissatisfied with their marital relationships and, like Shazeda, contemplated migrating again (see also Siddiqui 2001:84). In several cases, their husbands had remarried during their absence, which had led to a new set of challenges upon their return. While sociocultural norms made separation difficult, emotional attachment sometimes also played a role.

Migrant mothers and their children

Being away had undoubtedly been the hardest on the women who were mothers. These women often started to cry when talking about their children; they missed them and knew that they too were missed and needed. In some cases, migrating had first involved marrying off their teenage daughters (Siddiqui 2001:88). Two women we met had married off their 11- or 12-year-old daughters before they had left for Malaysia; the aim was to protect them from abuse. Razia, who had migrated because her family was in dire economic need, said: ‘She was very young, but what could I do? This is a slum area. She would not be safe without her mother around.’

As seen earlier, children did not always gain from their mother’s migrations to the extent the mothers had hoped: there were lower wages, and the social structures and children’s treatment by relatives, as well as their own decisions, sometimes led to different outcomes than the mothers had envisioned.

Three women were unhappy that their daughters had married while they were abroad. Guardian’s motivations were inclined by reasons of honour and age. Comla had been married at a young age and had had to stop going to school. She had been determined to circumvent this plight for her two daughters. However, while she was away, her in-laws thought differently and arranged a marriage for her 15-year-old
daughter, while her 12-year-old daughter dropped out of school. Despite her earnings and the improved relationship with her husband after her return, Comla called her migration experience a failure because of the effects it had had on the lives of her daughters and their futures. She had wanted the fate of her daughters to be different. It broke her heart to see history repeat itself.

In several cases, fathers or other relatives lovingly raised the children, with no major problems occurring. Some saw their wives’ migration as a temporary change and not as a threat to their manhood (Cf. Resurreccion & van Khanh 2007:221). As other studies have also shown, on the whole families are capable of coping with temporary separation. Children’s longing and resentment, however, do not necessarily disappear (Cf. Asis 2001; Parreñas 2001).

Many mothers felt troubled and guilty regarding the detrimental emotional or social effects their migration had had on their children. This feeling was further fuelled by accusations from within the family and the wider community. As Asis, Huang and Yeoh (2004:201) point out, while women have pushed forward the frontiers of the productive sphere through their participation as wage earning migrant workers, little has been achieved in moving borders of gendered norms with respect to women’s roles and identities in the reproductive sphere. Whether children had gone astray or were perceived to have been spoiled, the community always seemed to blame the ‘deviant’ behaviour of the mother; it was their fault. While mothers had taken on a breadwinner’s role, this was often not compensated for by the fathers taking on their parental role competently (cf. Parreñas 2005:330). Fathers or other relatives were not held responsible, nor were the aunts and uncles or grandparents who had received remittances for their care accused of being slack. Some other studies on female migration from Indonesia and Thailand have come to different conclusions: relatives were held responsible if they had not fulfilled their duties (IN- STRAW 2000; Chantavanich 2001). In Bangladesh the fact that children may have suffered is often used to underline the moral conviction that women ought not to migrate; they should stay at home and conform to appropriate gender behaviour. Those mothers who went were considered ‘selfish’.

As mentioned earlier, Leyla was blamed for her children going astray. In their neighbourhood of Dhaka, however, a very large number of young teenagers drop out of school, and there are many young love-marriages and addicts. While Leyla’s children undoubtedly missed their mother, it is not certain that their lives would have taken another course had she not left. Siddiqui (2001:74) also notes that children’s perceived educational failings are too easily blamed on the women’s absence. Additionally, the fact that the mothers suffer a lot from being away from their children

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28. Women are often not aware of the exact situation at home while they are abroad. Unless the children wrote about it themselves, many did not know. Relatives did not want to upset them or wanted them to stay on, as the remittances were needed or desired.

29. It should be noted that apart from other cultural differences, in those countries female employment in general was more common and socially accepted, as was female migration in particular.

30. She also found that the rate at which the migrant women’s children dropped out of school was actually lower than the national average.
and that many migrated in order to better their children’s future, is often ignored. By reacting adversely to women’s migration, relatives and communities further complicate and aggravate the situation of the children who are left behind, particularly if their suffering is used to further stigmatize their migrant mothers.

On a brighter note, some of the women who had teenagers told them about their experiences and shared with them the knowledge they had gained while abroad. The women who had children after they returned from Malaysia often talked extensively about how they envisioned educating their daughters. They regarded education as a prerequisite for a brighter future. Further research should investigate the potential positive impact of migration on children in Bangladesh.

9.6 Women’s position in and versus the community

As seen in earlier chapters, perceptions on women’s migration, gossip and stigmatization were often feared and could have a significant impact on a woman’s well-being. Gossip is part and parcel of community life, and women are often talked about. About half the women we met did not seem to be bothered by it; they were satisfied and felt safe with the lives they had and were not affected by people’s malicious criticism. Much of the criticism was relatively harmless and, according to some women, it was based on jealousy; many simply ignored it. As one woman remarked, neighbours usually did not mention her bidesh experience except during arguments, when it might be used against her: ‘She’s been in bidesh. Who knows what she did there!’ Yet, over the years the bidesh stories seemed to fade. By 2006, when we were looking for Shannaz in her parent’s village, people we asked for directions had forgotten that she had been in bidesh.

Nevertheless, more than a third of the women suffered from stigmatization and the effects of gossip, which were sometimes accompanied by threats from people in their communities. Malicious criticism was severe for those migrant women who had failed to fulfil their economic goals and/or who did not have a male guardian – a husband. Some women, like Nahar (see box 9.4 and 9.5), had been able to minimize harmful gossip and possible threats to their safety. Nahar had invested socially and economically in a well-respected guardian while simultaneously expressing her piousness, that is, by demonstrating her flawlessness as a ‘good’ woman by wearing a burka at all times when outside her home. As White (1994) observed, covering oneself up is not necessarily a sign of subordination or obedience, as it is often ascribed to be by Western scholars. Apart from religious conviction, it can be a means to improve one’s room to manoeuvre, to move by oneself without being watched or gossiped about, to be safe and respected.

Many others’ faced more severe situations. As Kabeer (2000) points out, in Bangladesh the protection of a man is perhaps even more important than his provision.

31 This is in line with accounts of many female garment workers (Amin 1998; Dannecker 1998; Kabeer 2000; Khundker 2001).
Women who had been to bidesh and were living without a husband after their return were regarded as a threat to the social order of their communities. The lives they had carved out for themselves, whether or not successfully so, were often perceived by the community as an affront to traditional gender roles. Many women were verbally abused for not having a husband and having ‘failed’, as in the case of Nazma (see box 9.1-9.3). Some unmarried women were pressured through social stigma as well as the desire to earn an income, and left their villages in search of jobs in Dhaka, feeling that they did not ‘fit in’. A concomitant criticism by community members was the fact that women must have lived adulterous or promiscuous lives abroad. Others, as seen earlier, were harshly blamed for having ruined their children’s lives. Depending on the severity of the community’s perceptions and gossip, many women felt socially isolated.

The way some community members approached the women who had been in bidesh was less related to the women’s migration than to the way women on their own are treated by society at large. The fact that a woman had been in bidesh, and all the connotations that came with it, was simply used as an excuse for that woman’s behaviour. Shazida’s story is a case in point.

Upon her return from Malaysia, Shazida, a divorced woman, bought a plot of land with the help of her siblings and built a house just outside Dhaka. Her sister lived in the same community. Before her migration, she and her children had lived with her relatives, moving from one sibling’s house to another. Shazida was proud that she now has her own house. She rented two rooms out, raised some poultry and engaged in sewing to make a living. However, some men in the community had sought her out. One man, who was known as having a criminal record, passed by regularly telling her that since she had been abroad she must have been a prostitute and pushing her to bestow her favours on him. During our visits to Shazida over the years, we could see that she felt unsafe. This man often insulted her and he became increasingly aggressive. When he also started to ask for her teenage daughter, she went with her son to her ex-husband’s village to ask for his protection for their children – with no results. During our visit in 2004, she said that she had thought a lot about her marriage and that she had made a mistake by divorcing her husband years earlier. She had divorced her husband after he had married a second wife. Her life was too difficult without a husband, she said. She had wanted her ex-husband to come with her and show the community that she had a husband. She did not want to be single, alone and unprotected. She had also hoped he would marry off their daughter safely. She wished that she had a husband, then all would go smoothly and she would be treated respectfully.

Since Shazida’s siblings could not guarantee her safety, they urged her to move away from the community. Eventually she sold her house and land at a price far lower than its value: her harasser had allegedly pressured the potential buyers. With the help of her siblings, she bought a plot of land in another community and built a house, albeit a smaller and more basic one than the first house. By 2006, Shazida had rebuilt her life. Her daughter was working in a garment factory; her son was also employed there, although irregularly. Shazida was known in the community as a goat herder; most people did not know about her trip to bidesh. She did not feel
completely accepted by the community, but was confident that in a few years she would be. It was clear to us that she had built friendly relationships with the women in the community and felt much safer than she had before. Despite her problems, she felt she had gained from her migration:

If I had not gone to Malaysia, I would not be here under this roof. Along with my son and daughter, I would have to spend my life moving from one place to another, being pushed from my brother’s to my sister’s to another sister’s house. In Malaysia, I learnt so many things. And now I have a house. Having a house gives you power. When you have a house, you are independent.

While not having a husband had made things more complicated for her and had led her to leave her first house due to harassment, this scenario could also have happened had she not been to bidesh. However, she would not have been able to live there in her own house had she not gone to Malaysia to earn more money. In that sense, harassment is also a response to the relative empowerment of women who take care of themselves. The fact that she was a woman living by herself – not ‘belonging’ to anyone and not being ‘kept under control’ by a man, as traditional gender norms call for – made her vulnerable to abuse. However, she persevered and eventually built a life in a community where she appeared to be respected and accepted.

As other authors have found, communities tend to regard a woman’s migration positively if she comes back from abroad economically and/or socially successful (Siddiqui 2001; Chantavanich 2001; Asis 2001; Sukamdi 2001). Although many other women whose migration outcomes were more mixed were confronted with gossip and community criticism, it appears that views on migrant women are not fixed. As Vertovec (2004:975) points out, the outlook and practices of those closely associated with the women and men who have migrated often shift as well. More research on this issue is needed.

9.7 Returned migrant women and work

While in Malaysia, many women had said that they wanted to continue generating an income after their return. They wanted to contribute to their household’s income; many also said that it made them feel good to work. They often envisioned working from home after they returned to Bangladesh.

Of the 29 women we met in Bangladesh, 16 were engaged in some form of income-generating activity or were urgently looking for work. For eight women it was a dire necessity, as there were no or few other sources of income in the household. Three of them had started doing garment work once more, but did not last long; it was badly paid and exhausting. A few other women who were in grave need of work were contemplating working in a garment factory when we last saw them.

Four women were engaged in income-generating activities that had been set up with money earned while abroad, as discussed earlier. These women were heading their own households. The investments made did not require hard labour. Four other
women were married and there was no urgent need for them to earn money. However, they had chosen to work from their homes, by rearing animals, renting out rooms or sewing clothes. Four other married women would have liked to pursue income-generating activities but there was no dire need and their husbands or in-laws did not approve of it. Six other women did not conduct any type of business and had no desire to.  

Many of the women who had not married or whose economic situation remained constrained felt that they were caught between the past – before migration – and a better post-migration future. It appeared that this period could last many years while one planned and continued to hope for a brighter future. Securing a stable economic base, including contemplating migrating again, seemed to form an integral part of the ‘between’ phase.

Some women felt that migration was simply not economically beneficial. Some of these women had already made money by investing in businesses in Bangladesh. Yet, for those women who had few options economically and socially, migration remained a suitable option.

The option of pursuing another migration was seriously considered by a third of the returned migrant women we met in Bangladesh. Some of the women, like Nazma, Hameeda and Latifa, felt that both their economic and their social prospects were dim. Migrating again was seen as an option to better their fate. These women said that they had made decisions concerning the allocation of their revenues that they would not make if they were to do it again. They would open their own bank accounts and not give their money to others. Additionally, seeking to migrate once more was partly a way to move beyond a social system in which viable options were perceived as limited, and to escape from painful personal situations. These women had gained confidence; they knew they could live abroad and sometimes longed for the enlarged social space they had known in Malaysia. Hence, migration can become cyclical (cf. Asis 2001; Chantavanich 2001).

Yet for these women, a second migration did not occur, as far as we know. Several women had paid fees to agents but their departure did not materialize either because there were no visas available or, in a few cases, the women backed out. Most women wanted to migrate to Malaysia again. They were wary about working as maids in the Middle East, since many stories about abuse had been circulated. However, there were few ways of getting to Malaysia. Officially, it was not possible, but since people had seen others go, they would believe the agents. They felt that they had few other choices. Aside from the policies intended to protect women (which in practice put them in danger, as explained in Chapter 3), there was a lack of adequate and verifiable information (cf. Spaan 1999). The main obstacle for the women who wanted to migrate again was a lack of money to pay the fee. Most women no longer had any savings and their relatives were not willing to lend them money. They did

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32. In the cases of three women, we were unsure whether they would like to work. Their future plans were uncertain when we met them as they had just returned from Malaysia.
not support their relative’s possible re-migration. In addition, migration fees had increased considerably.

Although the Malaysian government required fees to be fair in order to resume migration from Bangladesh, in 2006 fees to go to Malaysia had increased by roughly 200% to 180,000 takas for men and 130,000 takas for women (various personal communications).

**Box 9.6: Nazma’s homecoming - V**

A month had passed and Nazma had not yet settled in; she felt restless and alien in the village. She had gone to Dhaka several times with her nephew to look for a job. Years before, she had met a nice, educated lady who lived in Dhaka. She had kept her phone number all that time and hoped that she might help her find a job. But she couldn’t. It was hard to find any work without connections, bribes and a college degree. Nazma had also asked her uncle, who was involved in an agricultural project sponsored by an NGO, to help her. After all, she had been trained in agriculture by an NGO before she had left. He said he would look around for work for her, but had not sounded all that convincing. The only jobs that were available were in the garment sector; however, this option would be her last resort – she thought. The earnings were so low; one could hardly survive as a garment worker.

Still, she wanted to leave the village. After distributing the gifts upon her return, an event that had proved unimpressive to most of the onlookers, people had started talking about her. They said unkind things, saying her that she is ‘old’ now and still not married. A few days earlier, someone had maliciously pointed out that Abdul, who all those years back had not been allowed to marry her, was now happily married. He, and the refusal of both their families to agree to a marriage between them due to a family feud, had been an important reason why Nazma had gone abroad. ‘Abdul has a child already,’ the mischievous commenter had continued. Surely she had seen the child? Others asked her exactly what she had gained from going to bidesh. Their questions were vicious. They did not let her live in peace. At least in Malaysia people had not been bothered with discussing her life, she thought. She had written a letter to Rashid’s mother. Rashid had at least told her about Nazma, that much she knew. She had still not heard from him and she was very anxious. She had decided that if he did not come back in December, she would go to bidesh again. She had talked to a woman who knew a recruitment agent in Dhaka; she had taken down the address, just in case.

Several months later, her situation was the same. She occasionally travelled to Dhaka to search for employment via the sparse social network she had, but always unsuccessfully. We have had no news from her since and have not visited her village again.

### 9.8 Personal gains

The less tangible personal or concomitant consequences of migration are often but not always closely linked to the economic and social gains that migration brings. Many studies on Asian migrant women and on factory women in general, highlight women’s perceived increase in self-esteem and the value that women attach to this.
The experience of migration or of factory work often increases women’s confidence in their abilities and skills, and they become stronger and more self-reliant (Amin 1997:34; Tacoli 1999; INSTRAW 2000; Asis 2001; Beesey 2001; Willis 2001; Asis, Huang & Yeoh 2004:207).

As seen in Chapters 7 and 8, many of the women took great pride in the working and social skills they had obtained in Malaysia. They had an increased sense of self-confidence, and the various social skills the women had acquired (e.g. being able to go out and arrange ‘things’ or being capable of ‘talking to people’) were valued. As seen in this chapter, several of the women have benefited from the social skills, confidence and ability to persevere that they acquired in Malaysia. The women who had economically assisted their households through their migration were often admired by their relatives. Relatives also said that the women had acquired ‘knowledge’. It was not uncommon for these relatives to value the advice and feedback provided by these women; they had thus gained authority within the family.

For some women, their assets – that is, their houses and land – combined with their frank self-confidence appeared to have led to more egalitarian marital relations. Nahar is a case in point (box 9.4 and 9.5). Her husband, who had moved in with her, wanted to move to his own village, as he would have more prestige there. Nahar, however, refused to move, feeling that she would lose her relative independence if they did: not only her husband but also her in-laws would have power over her. She has carefully built her life, and the house and the land are hers. While being a ‘good’ Bangladeshi wife (i.e. being pious and modest and taking care of her family), she is bold too. ‘I cannot leave here,’ she told her husband; they therefore did not move.

Some of the women for whom migration had not turned out to be a success either socially or economically, felt that it would have been better not to have gone. However, several women still felt that they had personally benefited from their migration. Latifa, for example, had come back indebted; she had spent a lot of money on a new visa and work permit while still in Malaysia, and neither had materialized. She had entrusted people with her money, and lost it. Upon her return to Bangladesh, the husband-to-be her family had arranged for her a long time before, decided not to marry her after all. Latifa’s family, to whom Latifa was like an ‘eldest son’, had debts; the situation was dire. Latifa had been looking for a job ever since her return; she had worked in a retail shop in Dhaka for a while, but had quit because the salary was paid irregularly. Worry was carved on her face. Nevertheless, she explained that she had learnt much in bidesh. While being interviewed, Latifa had put many questions to Farhana, my research assistant. Later on she referred to this, saying that now she asks people questions: ‘I try to understand things. I can face people and I know about different cultures.’ In both 2004 and 2006 she referred to these changes that she valued. Latifa wanted to go to bidesh again, knowing that this time she would do things differently, that she had learned from her past experiences. Her future and that of her family were undecided when we last saw her. But one thing was sure: were she to go to bidesh again, she would make different decisions.
9.9 Conclusion

Kabeer (1998) recalls in her evaluative study of the effects of micro-credit programmes on women’s situations in Bangladesh that the women made a very explicit equation between the money they earned and the love (recognition, prestige) they received: ‘(...) because in an increasingly monetized economy, in which they have hitherto been denied access to any cash of their own, money represented purchasing power, prestige and value’ (1998:67). Their monetary achievements and the consequent availability of money gave them a certain level of prestige. Several studies on returned migrant women in Asia came to similar conclusions: migrant women who had succeeded economically were likely to have their social standing positively affected as well (Sukamdi 2001; Beesey 2001; Siddiqui 2001). Siddiqui (2001:83) found for Bangladeshi returned migrant women that those who had failed economically were stigmatized and blamed for it, and suffered greatly. While broadly speaking our study came to similar conclusions, we also found that economic success did not automatically lead to social prestige. Similarly, there were a few women who were not economically successful, yet they had married men of their choice and were socially accepted. In addition, for a few women, earning money had not been the issue.

As shown in this chapter, the migration outcomes were very diverse and complex, and should not be reduced to simplifying labels such as ‘success’ and ‘failure’. While wages had been lower than expected, many women had managed to save money and invest part of it to their liking. Some of these investments failed as a result of bad investment choices or of trusting too easily those they hoped would take care of and commit to them. As a consequence, some of the women were left socially and economically bereft. Other women, instead of trying to bind men to them by giving them money, had strengthened their fallback position and/or economic independence by investing in income-generating businesses or by building houses and buying land in their name.

Some women’s business and personal endeavours encountered sociocultural opposition; the unequal position of men and women in society make women socioeconomically vulnerable to those who opposed their agency. Nevertheless, despite opposition, many women had increased their scope of economic and social choices: approximately two thirds of the women who had aspired to marry a partner of their liking had managed to do so. Some women – especially those whose children had suffered during their absence – regretted some of the consequences of their migration, as did several of the women who had earned little or invested unsuccessfully. Yet, many women felt that they had personally benefited. Many women had migrated because their socio-economic room to manoeuvre had been severely limited. They had left to enlarge this ‘space’ and hence expand their future options. While the consequences of the women’s migration were clearly not always unequivocally positive, many women enlarged their social, economic and personal space through their migration experiences.
Table 9.5: summary of post-migration data

<p>| Fact- | Extensi- | Visi- | Visi- | Visi- | Land | Land | Income- | Lost | Lending | Marital | Desired | Engaged in |
| tory | tively | ted in: | ted in: | ted in: | bought | in | generating | gold or | money to | status | to get | income-generating |
|      | viewed | ‘01 | ‘04 | ‘06/ | own | name | activities | money | husband/ | before | married, | activities |
|      | while in | in | in | 07 |     |     | that | that | potential | migration; | s | s | |
|      | Malaysia | Malaysia | Malaysia | Malaysia |     |     | others | others | husband | desire to | to get | to get | |
|      | ‘99/ | ‘99/ | ‘99/ | ‘99/ |     |     | promised | promised | while in | marry/ | married, | married, |
|      | ‘01 | ‘01 | ‘01 | ‘01 |     |     | to bring | to bring | Malaysia | remarry | married, | married, |
|      |     |     |     |     |     |     | home | home | (in takas) | | s | s | |
| 1 Nahar | F3 | R | R | x | x | x | x | x | 30000 | 240,000 | UM yes | yes | tailoring |
| 2 Latifa | F2 | R | R | x | x | x | x | x | 40000 | 20,000 | UM yes | no | need to, not |
| 3 Shannaz | F2 | R | R | x | x | x | x | x | No | D yes | Yes | no, would like |
| 4 Sabina | F1 | R | R | x | x | x | x | x | 50,000 | D yes | No | no, would like |
| 5 Salma | F2 | R | R | x | R | x | x | x | 100,000 | D yes | Yes | to |
| Hel. | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 6 Parveen | F2 | R | R | x | x | x | x | x | No | W no | | need to, not |
| 7 Shazeda | E* | R | R | x | R | x | x | x | No | M no | | would like |
| 8 Laizu | E | X | X | x | x | x | x | x | n/a | M no | | liquor business |
| 9 Parul | E | R | R | X | x | x | x | x | n/a | M no | | land, business |
| 10 Leyla | E | R | x | X | x | x | x | x | n/a | M yes | No | no |
| 11 Razia | E | x | R | x | x | x | x | x | No | M no | | money lending |
|       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       | cleaner (offices) |</p>
<table>
<thead>
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<th>No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
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<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
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<th>UM</th>
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<td>x</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<td>R</td>
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<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>D no</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<td>D no</td>
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<td>F2</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>n/a</td>
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<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>110,000</td>
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<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>60,000</td>
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<td>R</td>
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<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>M no</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>R</td>
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<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>Shanty</td>
<td>T†††</td>
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<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>80,000 +</td>
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<td>T</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>D no</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
R = Repeatedly visited over the course of several months,
UM = unmarried, D = divorced, W = widowed
* E = an electronics factory
** Razia’s primary reason for migrating was to pay back her family debts of 100,000 takas, which she did.
*** Parul came from a well-off family. She had left for Malaysia to get away from a brief but very violent marriage. There was no need for her to send money back.
**** Shuli did marry, but not the man she had once loved and lent the 8000 ringgits to.
† At the age of 15, Farhana had been sent by her relatives to earn money to repay her father’s debt. The money she sent back covered only a part of the loan. She became ill from all the pressure put on her and left Malaysia prematurely
†† Ashrimp factory
††† A textile plant