Working gendered boundaries: temporary migration experiences of Bangladeshi women in the Malaysian export industry from a multi-sited perspective
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CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSIONS

10.1 The pre-migration stage

The question ‘Why do people migrate?’ is pivotal to all migration studies. As shown by the theoretical discussion in Chapter 2, migration theorists can be divided into two camps: those who take a functionalist approach and state that migrants’ individual economic aspirations are the main impetus behind migration, and those who take a historical structural approach and assert that the main impetus is economic, social and political inequality, in other words, that migration is a decision that is more or less forced upon people by structural factors. Although some scholars have attempted to reconcile the two approaches, the rift between agency and structure has not been entirely overcome.

Despite increased scholarly interest, there has been little concerted effort to integrate gender into theories of international migration theory (Boyd & Grieco 2003:1; Mahler & Pessar 2006:28). This is evidenced by the literature on female migration. Many migration scholars have argued that women’s migrations are largely sacrificial: women predominantly migrate out of feelings of responsibility for their family members; their trips abroad are seen as embedded in their identities as ‘dutiful daughters’ or ‘altruistic mothers’ (Chant 1992; Bjeren 1997:242; Barber 1997; Yeoh & Huang 2000; Chantavanich 2001; Oishi 2005; Arya & Roy, 2006). According to these scholars, repressive structural forces embedded in gender inequality and poverty are the underlying reasons for female migration.

Other studies, however, have shown that many women actively choose to migrate in order to improve both their financial and their social situation. It is found that women migrate to escape oppressive or conflictual situations or marriages, or to seek a brighter future in which they will have more decision-making power over their own lives (Morokvasic 1984, 2003; Grasmuck & Pesar, 1991; Tacoli 1999; Kofman et al. 2000; Gamburd 2000; Phizacklea 2003; Mahler & Pessar 2006). In other words, many women migrate to pursue better lives.

There are clearly no universal or clear-cut answers as to why women migrate. Individuals’ motivations differ, as do their social contexts. Nevertheless, it is striking that scholars who study women from the same country of origin and similar socio-economic strata sometimes come to rather conflicting conclusions as to why women migrate.

This study has shown that structural and individual reasons for migration intersect in complex ways. The economic situation of Bangladesh (i.e. economic deprivation and high rates of unemployment) were important incentives for migration for most of the women and men with whom we spoke. To many, another reason to migrate was the fact that employment for women in Bangladesh is structurally limited as a result of gender norms and ideals. The endeavours of pioneering Bangladeshi coin-
cided with the need of entrepreneurial Malaysians for more workers. These factors together with the religious proximity of the two countries resulted in the 1990s in a migration system that enabled large numbers of Bangladeshi workers to migrate to Malaysia on temporary work visas.

Within this structural context, individual motivations and incentives played major roles. When my research assistant and I first met the women and conducted a survey, two thirds of the women stated that the primary reason for their migration had been economic and was primarily related to helping their family. One third of the women stated they had migrated for personal reasons, many of which were related to overcoming adversity in marriage. This finding is largely in line with the findings of many scholars who stress the altruistic argument mentioned above. However, the numerous informal discussions we had during the study made it clear that very often the actual situation was rather different and more complex. For many a woman, stating that she had migrated for the economic benefit of the family was largely a safe and socially correct answer. As the women’s confidence in us increased and they felt more at ease within the Bangladeshi Malaysian community, different stories were told and revealed other factors that had led to their migration. While some women had migrated primarily for the benefit of others, most also had reasons of their own.

As extensively discussed throughout this study, marriage plays a central role in the lives of Bangladeshi women. It was found that for most unmarried and divorced women, migration had been an individual and a proactive way to enlarge their say in marriage issues. To some young women, migration had been a way to escape humiliating or painful situations, for instance if they knew that a desired marriage would not materialize because their parents opposed it, or they had returned to their parental homes to escape unfulfilling and abusive marriages. For at least a third of the unmarried women, marriage negotiations had been ongoing before their departure for bidesh, but the groom had not been of their own choosing. Migration was a way to postpone marriage. Migration was also a means to fulfill another desire: many young women would have liked to continue their studies, yet their families had decided otherwise for financial or gendered reasons. To these women, migration was a way ‘to develop themselves’, as they put it. While some lacked the economic means to marry a desirable husband, others did not want to marry yet. It was generally felt that one could not escape marriage. Nor did the women necessarily want to: many dreamed of one day being ‘happily married ever after’. By migrating, most of the young women hoped that upon their return with the money they had earned, they would be able have a say in who they would marry, when and under which conditions.

For many of the married, divorced or widowed women, migration was a way to enlarge their social space, as well as to earn money in order to better their own and their children’s lives. Migration was an escape from bossy, lazy or abusive husbands or relatives on whom they depended financially and socially.

The findings of this study show that while such economic and structural factors as poverty and gender inequality played a crucial role in the Bangladeshi women’s decision to migrate, many were individually motivated to overcome gender impas-
ses in order to enlarge their own social and economic space. Hence, their migrations were not mere reflections of gender oppression but a result of their determination to improve their lives. This became even clearer when analysing the processes of decision making that had led to the women’s migrations.

In migration theory, the household or the family is generally identified as the locus in which decision making concerning migration takes place. Earlier theorists emphasized that migration is a family strategy that promotes the best interests of all (Boyd 1989), while other scholars have highlighted the uneven power relations within families and the influence this has on decision-making power. In other words, to understand people’s migration it is important to capture the dynamics of decision making (Wolf 1999; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Kofman et al. 2000; Phizacklea 2003; Mahler & Pessar 2006). Some studies have shown the proactive role that women have taken in the decision-making process (Gasmuck & Pessar 1991; Gamburd 2000; Phizacklea 2003).

While many of the scholars who studied female migration refer to the importance of the decision-making process, it is interesting to note that the actual decision-making process is usually given only scant attention in the research methodologies that are applied in these empirical studies. Nevertheless, most scholars who adhere to structural explanations of gender subordination concur that the migration decision is often made for women (Yeoh & Huang 2000; Chantavanich 2001; Arya & Roy 2006).

Our study found that most women had had an active stake in their migrations. In the initial survey, almost half of the women stated that their migration had been a mutual decision. While almost as many said that it had been primarily their own decision, the in-depth interviews revealed that the proportion was in fact larger. The decision-making process had often been tedious and complex, but the large majority of the women we spoke to in depth had initiated their own move. Again, we found that the sociocultural desirability of relatives’ initiative as opposed to one’s own was an underlying reason for these differences in research findings. Of all the women we spoke to in depth, more than half had had to overcome major obstacles in order to obtain their relatives’ consent. One fifth of these women made their migration arrangements in secrecy without seeking the consent or approval of their relatives. Consequently, some left in circumstances that were rife with conflict. The fact that it was not always easy for women to obtain their relatives’ consent is directly related to conventional interpretations of purdah and gender roles: women ought not to migrate alone. Relatives worried about the women’s safety and izzat, and about the family’s honour and how the community would react.

Many of the women had had to convince their fathers and brothers and had strategized towards this end. Many had used very similar tactics: drawing on their social and symbolic resources; in other words, capitalizing on the confidence and support of influential family members with whom they had good relations. Some women had already been working and thus economically contributing to the household, which had improved their social standing and bargaining power in the family. It was thus easier for them to obtain consent. Apart from social and symbolic capital and
the economic incentive, such personal traits as a woman’s perseverance, boldness and determination also played important roles in obtaining the required consent.

However, for all the women – whether or not they had prior job experience and irrespective of their personal motivations for migration – ‘migrating for the betterment of the family’ was the incentive that persuaded their guardians to give their consent. Because their personal incentives were generally not in line with gender norms, they were usually not mentioned.

Our findings show that for many of the Bangladeshi women, the decision-making process had been complex and had actively engaged them in redefining gendered boundaries of appropriate behaviour for women. The interviews we held in the migrants’ neighbourhoods and villages in Bangladesh revealed that many women who wanted to migrate had not managed to get their families’ consent and were thus unable to migrate. More research into this area is needed.

An interesting question pertains to the motivations and decision-making processes of the male Bangladeshi who had migrated to Malaysia: were their motivations and decision-making processes different from those of the women? While an increasing number of migration studies purport to look at gender, few incorporate female and male migrants in their analyses. Although many studies have focused on female migration only, gender pertains to both women and men: the working of gender can be adequately understood only by revealing the possible differences in experiences, motivations and perceptions between men and women. We found that the Bangladeshi men’s migrations had usually been less voluntarily than those of the Bangladeshi women: while twenty-five per cent of the men had migrated because they had been sent by their fathers and elder brothers, the figure for the women is only seven per cent. This finding is perhaps not so surprising in light of the prevalent definitions of masculinity: sons are expected to contribute to the extended household and obey their fathers and elder brothers. Thus, men’s migrations were largely in line with conventional gender norms and definitions of masculinity, while the women’s were not.

Although the economic situation of the male migrants’ households was generally better than that of the women’s households, the predominant reason underlying the men’s migration was to earn money for their families. This was also the case for those men whose migrations had been their own choice (about half of all the men we spoke to). It is however important to note that, as in the case of the Bangladeshi women, to many men migration was also a personal desire: they wanted to improve their life opportunities and to escape a gloomy future in Bangladesh. The high unemployment rates meant that they saw few future prospects in their home country; the migration myth was appealing, and a ticket to bidesh was also a ticket to a better life. Most of the men were unmarried. Although their personal status and honour was not tied to their marital status as it is for Bangladeshi women, marriage did play a role. Many men felt they could not marry unless they had created a stable economic future and would thus be reliable providers for their future families. Some considered Malaysia a ‘between’ phase that would enable them to migrate to Europe, Australia or even the United States.
In short, gender roles, expectations and concomitant limitations featured in women’s and men’s migration motivations and decisions, albeit in different ways. In the literature, female migration is often indiscriminately portrayed as a continuation of women’s gendered oppression. The finding of this study, however, is that both the women and the men had migrated partly to enlarge their own scope of socio-economic choices. It is interesting to note that more men than women migrated primarily to fulfil their classic gender role of earning for the family, while no migration discourse associates men’s migrations with such notions as ‘dutifulness’ or ‘altruism’ – yet women’s migrations are.

The women’s decision to migrate was often in line with a simultaneous desire to earn money to help their families. Structural and personal factors were intricately interwoven in the migration motivation, often in similar but nevertheless personal, unique ways. Theoretical frameworks employed to understand migration should therefore incorporate the dynamics of personal and structural factors while employing a gendered perspective and incorporating, when applicable, both female and male migrants.

Labelling women’s motivations ‘altruistic’ or ‘sacrificial’ and implicitly portraying them as meek victims does not reflect their reality. Taking women seriously as agents means also taking into serious consideration their relationships and commitment to others. To this end, scholars should listen to their stories with open minds, as this study shows that women are inclined to relate somewhat socially correct versions of their motivations so as to present themselves as ‘good’ women for reasons related to prestige and safety. In a lot of sending societies, female migration, like many other gender-related issues, entails socioculturally sensitive aspects.

The above has methodological consequences. Research methods should be sensitive to the fears and vulnerability of the research subjects. The methods chosen must be able to reveal potential socioculturally sensitive patterns and motivations. Thus, qualitative research methods must be applied to supplement quantitative methods. Longitudinal research – namely repeated encounters over a period of time – is generally required in order to create confidence and trust and to build rapport. Researchers must make a conscious effort to let go of preconceived ideas, hypothesis and ideologies while listening to the stories of women and men. This is a challenging requirement, one that I too must meet.

Likewise, researchers must not fall prey to stereotypical gender beliefs about women and men: we must recognize the gender beliefs that are so ingrained in our social structures that we hold them unconsciously. While a lot of effort is devoted to definitions of femininity and women’s roles, definitions of masculinity are less studied. More research into definitions of masculinities and femininities and how they relate to one another will deepen our understanding of migration dynamics.

In order to actually migrate, the migrants we spoke to had relied on the migration institution: a conglomerate of middlemen and agents who recruit for Malaysian agents and industries and provide the necessary papers. The migrant institution is easy to access in Bangladesh. The informal networks are widely spread and loosely organized; everyone knows someone who has contacts or a piece of information. Most women accessed the migrant institution with the help of male relatives. Howe-
ver, information about jobs and recruiters cannot be verified. This in combination with the grapevine stories perpetuates the migration myth; fees are high and so are the risks – yet the former are paid and the latter taken. Aspiring Bangladeshi migrants often lose money or end up with migration papers that are not valid. Almost 20% of our respondents have relatives who had lost money while trying to obtain an overseas work visa from an agent. The average amount lost was 93,000 takas (approximately 2000 euros). While migration fees are arbitrary and differ, the men had paid around 50% more than the women. To protect the rights of migrants or potential migrants, adequate law enforcement is crucial.

10.2 The migration stage

The working and living conditions of temporary migrants abroad have received relatively little academic attention in either empirical studies or theoretical endeavours. The vast majority of migration theory focuses on permanent migrants and is thus less suitable for the analyses of temporary labour migration.

Various bodies of literature were instructive for the analytical framework of this study. Drawing on transnationalism, I departed from the recognition that temporary migrants are socioculturally dually embedded: their focus is on both the host and the sending country. To adequately understand the migration dynamics and the experiences of migrants, four domains were included in the analytical framework, namely the domains of work, the community, the household and the self.

To answer the question whether Bangladeshi migrant workers were capable of fulfilling their aims in Malaysia, it was necessary to first look into the conditions of work, contracts and actual levels of remunerations. There is often little legal protection or institutional support for temporary migrants, and this makes many migrants vulnerable to discriminatory treatment and abuse (Abella 2006; Wickramasekara 2007). Few studies in the field of international migration have focused on factory workers. The vast literature on domestic migration and factory women employed in FTZs is most relevant when looking at migrants who work abroad in the industrial sector. Early studies on factory women mainly focused on the exploitation of factory workers (Daud 1985; Ong 1987; Heyzer 1989). More recently, studies have increasingly emphasized that despite deplorable working conditions and low payments, many factory women value the impact their jobs have on some aspects of their lives, such as an increase in their decision-making power and self-esteem, and sometimes in their social standing (Wolf 1992; Pearson 1998; Gandhi & Shah, 2002; Chhachhi 2004).

To understand factory workers’ situation, Chhachhi (2004:33) introduced the concept of ‘gendered labour regimes’:

Negotiated orders that emerge through the interplay between state intervention (implicit and explicit legal regulation), managerial strategies and practices of labour control and restructuring, worker’s subjectivities/agency and the social institutions of the labour market and the household.
Among others, Chhachhi draws on Burawoy’s (1985) modes of labour management. In the absence of state intervention, ‘despotic’ factory regimes prevail. When the state starts to intervene and legal regulations are put in place, a more hegemonic factory regime emerges. Chhachhi emphasizes that laws and legal entitlements alone are insufficient to distinguish between factory regimes. Law enforcement is the distinguishing aspect, often a process evolving over time and the result of workers’ organization and struggle (Chhachhi 2004:32).

While it was beyond the scope of this study to involve Malaysian workers, the findings in combination with secondary sources indicate the existence of two labour regimes in Malaysia, namely one that applies to local workers and one that applies to migrant workers. The former come under a regime in which they are protected by law. While law enforcement is not optimal (Todd, Lansbury & Davis 2004:2; Bhopal & Rowley 2005), legal institutions to ensure law enforcement are in place and there are some active unions. Migrant workers come under a regime from which legal protection and law enforcement are virtually absent; migrants’ rights are not ensured. While in theory migrants can join unions, in practice they are largely prevented from doing so. Work permits are tied to employers, and if a migrant loses his or her job or chooses to switch jobs, he or she loses the right to be in the country. Although there were no significant wage differences observed between female and male migrant workers, more Bangladeshi women than men had been sent home for having a relationship with the opposite sex. Surveillance or paternalistic moralism had been passed down from male relatives in Bangladesh to factory owners.

Distinguishing between the factors that at different levels of analysis contributed to migrant workers’ working conditions and the fulfilment of their economic goals sheds further light on the factors that constitute a ‘migrant labour regime’. First, at the level of the migrant institution, the migrants’ attempts to realize their economic aspirations were frustrated by discrepancies between the promises made by agents and the wages they actually received. Agencies and middlemen in Bangladesh cooperate with agents in Malaysia and with Malaysian employers in labour-intensive industries. No institution adequately supervises the activities of these agencies, and job information cannot be verified. High wages are promised. It could be argued that migrants too readily believe the agents and the stories that constitute the migration myth. Many of the Bangladeshi workers counter-argued that they had little choice. Promises made while in Bangladesh frequently did not match the situation the migrants encountered in Malaysia. A closely related problem is the exorbitantly high fees charged by agents: it took many migrants as long as two years to repay the initial investment.

Second, the migrants’ did not earn as much as envisioned as a result of factors at the company level. The employers – like the agents – frequently made promises that they did not fulfill. Contracts that had been signed in Bangladesh with representatives of the Malaysian or multinational company were breached in three of the four main factories where the Bangladeshi migrant workers were employed. New contracts that were different from the ones received in Bangladesh were handed out upon the migrants’ arrival, or the original contracts were simply not honoured in terms of basic wages, allowances or annual wage increments. In many factories
overtime rates were not paid according to Malaysian labour law. Some migrants arrived to find that their labour was not needed at all, and they were sent back to Bangladesh with no compensation for the personal losses.

The third reason why many migrants were not able to attain their economic goals is related to the turmoil in the global economy that resulted from the Asian financial crisis. The migrants were affected in three interrelated ways:

— Exchange rates between the Malaysian ringgit and the Bangladeshi taka had decreased significantly, affecting the real value of the remittances sent home and the earnings brought back. The decrease amounted to 36% in the first year after the crisis, and an average of 18% in the four years following the start of the economic crisis.

— While many migrant workers had lost their jobs (they had been the first to be made redundant), most of the migrants in this study retained their jobs. However, the employers tried to increase their competitive edge by further reducing their labour costs, and many of the migrants suffered significant wage reductions.

— The high inflation rate led to an increase in food prices; between 1995 and 2000, the increase amounted to 28%.

Finally, the extent to which migrants were able to attain their economic goals was also determined by state policies and law enforcement. While the laws of Malaysia do not discriminate against migrant workers, in practice the rights of migrant workers are not fully protected (MTUC 2005).

To ensure that employers do not substitute foreign labour for local labour, in the early 1990s a levy was imposed on each foreign worker employed in Malaysia. In practice, however, the levy is deducted from the migrants’ wages. As the law does not prevent employers from doing this, its original purpose is defeated. Levy deductions are considerable, amounting to 25-30% of the basic monthly wage of the migrants we studied. Since work permits bind migrants to their employers and they must leave the country if their contracts are terminated, employers have a huge amount of leverage over their workers. If workers feel that they are not being treated lawfully and challenge their employers, they are usually threatened with dismissal. If dismissed, they become undocumented and hence are ‘illegal’. If they file a case in court, they can stay for three more months on a special permit. However, they must pay 100 ringgits a month for the permit and are not allowed to work during the 3-month period – and court cases often take longer than that to be settled. As this situation makes seeking legal redress for unfair treatment or breaches of contract rather difficult (Syed Shahir 2006), few migrants take their employers to court.

Several studies found that many employers prefer foreign to local workers, thus substantiating the dual labour regime thesis. According to employers, migrant workers are very ‘diligent and compliant’, as they, unlike local workers, cannot easily job-hop. Some also readily admit that foreign workers are cheaper than local workers (Lee & Sivananthiran 1996:89; Rudnick 1996; Abdul-Aziz 2001; Smakman 2004; Kung & Wang 2006).
Surprisingly, most academic studies that focus on the Malaysian industrial sector do not acknowledge that a third of its labour force consists of migrant workers, even though this has been the case since the early 1990s (cf. Caspersz 1998; Rasiah 2001; Elias 2005; Bhopal & Rowley 2005). The fact that migrants are often treated and paid differently is ignored, as is the effect that this has on all workers and working relations in general. Hence a somewhat limited if not distorted representation of labour relations in the manufacturing sector is provided. More research on the industrial sector in Malaysia is needed that incorporates all workers, both local and foreign, in order to expose possible differences and dynamics and the impact of such on industrial relations.

Many of the Bangladeshi migrant workers tried to discuss their maltreatment and the unfair payments with their management, but generally to no avail. A few attempts at collective action had been made – at a high price: those who initiate such actions are usually sent home, which effectively puts an end to the workers’ attempts to obtain their rights through collective action. Joining a union (if there was one to join, that is) was usually not regarded as an option; migrants were scared of repercussions from employers.

It should be noted that in contemporary Malaysia, labourers have limited bargaining power. Labour laws, in as far as they are intended to protect workers’ welfare, are often poorly administered and generally more supportive of managerial prerogatives. Union activity, although prevalent, is curbed; only a small percentage of workers are unionized. However, the scope to redress unjust labour practices is wider for local workers than for foreign workers. Local workers often feel resentful towards migrant workers, because the hiring of foreign workers has worsened the locals’ bargaining position. Fracturing the workforce along ethnic lines has been common practice in Malaysia ever since colonial times; the hiring of migrant labour and the related policies and regulations simply reiterate this practice (cf. Garcés-Mascareñas 2006).

The Malaysian Trade Union Congress (MTUC) has rightly called for the equal treatment of foreign and local workers, as this would ultimately benefit all workers (MTUC 2005). While seeking legal redress or organizing collective actions were not regarded viable options, this did not mean that Bangladeshi migrants did not seek to change their situation. Despite the fact that switching employers was illegal and entailed serious risks of being detained and deported, an estimated 20-30% of the Bangladeshi women employed in the four main factories we studied had left their original employer for a new one. It is thought that the Bangladeshi men change jobs even more frequently. Migrants change employers for two reasons: out of fear of being sent home by their original employers, or because they are unhappy with the working conditions and payments in the original factory. If workers cannot obtain their rights in the company they were hired for, the only way out of their plight is to look for jobs elsewhere. To obtain the required ‘official’ documents, they have to make another significant investment (an average of 2200-4000 ringgits).

Many migrants who are not paid as promised or as stipulated by law see no option but to look for another employer by absconding or overstaying and becoming ‘undocumented’. Because documented and undocumented migration statuses are intri-
cately linked (cf. Rudnick 1996:75; Garcés-Mascareñas 2006:11), the lack of law enforcement and the inadequate protection of migrant workers’ rights contribute to what is regarded as a major problem in Malaysia: the preponderance of ‘illegal’ migrants.

In terms of workers’ struggles and change, the literature on women factory workers often analyses this in terms of empowerment potential. These studies aim to reveal women’s agency and to counteract structuralist theories that have focused only on oppression. Factors that are highlighted include economic parameters, the extent to which workers organize and the impact on their decision-making power.

Some scholars have focused on what are called ‘covert forms of resistance’ (Constable 1999; Mullings 1999; Harington 2000). These studies are theoretically inspired by James Scott’s (1985) work on peasants ‘everyday forms of resistance’ in rural Malaysia. Their analyses stress the positive empowerment potential of women’s work. Sometimes, however, the emphasis on these ‘everyday forms of resistance’ appears to overstate the actual structural effects on payments, working conditions and women’s lives in general and can arguably be rather misleading (cf. Harrington 2000). I found that the Bangladeshi migrant women also resorted to similar ‘covert’ actions of disobedience; however, in my analysis the actions need to be seen as coping mechanisms rather than as ‘resistance’ per se. The non-confrontational acts of disobedience by which supervisors were outsmarted had no structural effect on the migrants’ wages or treatment in general. These acts were nonetheless of great significance, as at times working conditions were somewhat improved. Moreover, these acts greatly helped to maintain a sense of self, of dignity and of being in charge.

The way Bangladeshi men and women reacted to their working situation differed somewhat. Both men and women had tried to instigate collective acts; these men and women were generally higher educated. Yet, generally women were more fearful of being sent home than the men and they spoke up less frequently. While both had much to lose by being sent home, the women were liable to lose more: their prospects were closely related to maintaining or increasing their ‘honour’, economically, socially and physically.

More men than women had absconded. The men were better connected and more mobile, while the women were more concerned about their safety, particularly their physical safety. Although few mentioned cases of sexual abuse (and no-one admitted having been subjected to such abuse), there was concern over physical safety. Another closely related difference between men and women was their outspokenness concerning their situation. Whereas the women were often hesitant to talk with us about work issues, the men were eager to discuss the injustices they observed. Although the relatively higher educational level of most of the men seemed to play a role in this, other gendered reasons played an equally important role. Bangladeshi men’s socializing and collective experience are generally more geared to insisting on their rights and speaking out about injustices than women’s are. The women’s collective experience generally is that it is wiser and more beneficial to act prudently and discreetly. Again, the women felt that they had more to lose and were less trust-
ting of strangers. While the men tended to exaggerate their situation, the women were inclined to downplay payments and treatment that were not in line with the law.

A further difference between the men and the women concerns job satisfaction. The women’s job satisfaction was significantly higher than the men’s. In contrast to the men, the women frequently emphasized the non-wage benefits they gained from their employment. They were conscious of the skills and working experience they had acquired, and many were proud of them. Although the women also felt a general dissatisfaction with wage levels and working conditions, an equally valid feeling of personal gain in terms of skills, increased self-esteem and self-confidence prevailed.

There was a clear difference in the information about working conditions that migrant women and men divulged while still in Malaysia and after their return. Some felt more comfortable relating cases of mistreatment after they had returned home. However, some women downplayed what they had earlier experienced as adverse; hardship had been forgotten. To fully understand migrants’ context and situations, fieldwork should be conducted in both the sending and the receiving country.

An interesting observation concerning employers’ general preference for female labour can be made. The vast literature on factory women emphasizes the importance of the feminine traits of ‘docility’ and ‘dexterity’ in labour-intensive industries, which is believed to be an important reason for the predominance of women workers in the sector. However, the fact that many male Bangladeshis were hired and that employers often preferred them to local female workers (Rudnick 1996; Smakman 2004) indicates that the desired attributes of workers are not related to the workers’ sex or biological inclinations; rather, these are largely influenced by the workers’ position and relative social and economic vulnerability within society at large and, more specifically, vis-à-vis employers. In short, a worker’s sex alone does not necessarily reveal his or her position in the labour hierarchy in a factory. Researchers should be careful not to generalize about issues related to gender.

In sum, local and migrant workers operate to some extent under different labour regimes. The data shows that Chhachhi’s (2004) concept of gendered labour regimes is also relevant to the definition of a ‘migrant labour regime’. What must be added to her definition when developing the concept of a migrant labour regime are factors relating to the impact the migrant institution and the global economy have on migrants’ working and living conditions. Failure to protect the rights of migrant workers and the unequal treatment of local and migrant workers resulting from inadequate regulations and law enforcement lie at the heart of why migrant workers are not treated well and do not earn what they are entitled to.

Recent policy formulations and implementation in Malaysia do not seem to indicate that migrant workers’ rights are better protected now than they were in the 1990s when the migrants in this study first went to bidesh (Syed Shahir 2006). For theoretical purposes it can be asserted that the migrant labour regime in Malaysia is determined by a complex of state intervention and law enforcement, and by the workings of the migrant institution, the managerial practices of labour control, the dynamics that pertain to the global economy and the migrant workers’ agency. While this study shows that the structural context clearly has a negative impact on the socio-
economic situation of migrants, we found that on an individual level, the working experience gave many of the Bangladeshi women a sense of fulfilment.

The findings of this study point to the importance of incorporating structural as well as individual levels of analyses when studying issues related to labour. The analytical framework of studies that seek to understand the situation of factory workers needs to accommodate apparent paradoxes, namely of hardship and unjust working conditions, as well as a certain level of job satisfaction and a sense of socio-economic gain.

To adequately answer the question whether the Bangladeshi migrants were able to achieve their goals in Malaysia, it was necessary to also look into migrants’ social lives, relationships and environments. Most migration studies focus on permanent migration and concentrate on adaptation and integration issues. For most temporary migrants, residency is not an option. Consequently, migration theories and analytical frameworks are often less appropriate for the analyses of short-term, contract migration. Studies on transnationalism are arguably most suitable when studying temporary migration. These have shown that migrants often retain a ‘dual frame of reference’, a dual orientation to the ‘here’ (the host country) and to the ‘there’ (the country of origin). Aspects of life ‘here’ and ‘there’ are monitored and perceived as complementary aspects of a single space experience, as they impact migrants’ everyday lives, activities, attitudes, perceptions and decisions (Guarnizo 1997; Vertovec 2004:975; Itzigsohn & Giorguli-Saucedo 2005:900). Although some scholars do look at gender, gender has not been structurally integrated into theoretical frameworks that are based on transnationalism. Moving from one place to another, however, often means moving between different gendered spaces. Gender roles, values and norms may differ in the receiving country from those in the home country. Migration may cause social norms and behaviour that were habitually reproduced to be seen in a different light, which may result in a sociocultural reorientation. However, as migration scholars have stressed (Anthias 2001; Parreñas 2001), moving to a society that has a different set of gender norms is not necessarily ‘liberating’ or ‘constraining’, but can mean different things in different domains and contexts to different women. As some studies have shown, social surveillance can differ profoundly for men and women (Espín 1999; Morokvasic 2003). In the receiving country, female migrants’ social behaviour and activities are frequently closely monitored by the migrant community.

To explore migrant women’s bifocality, it is helpful to focus on the domain of the community, the domestic domain and the domain of self. Although Bangladesh and Malaysia are largely Muslim societies, gender norms and roles are not the same in the two countries. Malaysian women have historically been more visible in the public realm. Factory women are no longer stigmatized, as they are in Bangladesh. As far as marriage is concerned, the dowry system (which is not an Islamic tradition) does not exist in Malaysia; instead, upon marriage, the husband pays a bride price to his wife’s family. Nowadays, women have gained a pivotal say in choosing their grooms; dating and having boyfriends is relatively common in Malaysia. For the purpose of this study, more pivotal than actual differences in gender positions bet-
ween women from these two countries were the Bangladeshi women’s perceptions of differences between their lives and the lives of Malaysian women. In addition to liking the political and economic climate in Malaysia, Bangladeshi women highly appreciated Malaysian women’s relative self-determination, especially their right to work and the social acceptability of their working. By earning a salary, Malaysian women were perceived to be less dependent on men and to have more alternatives if a marriage ended due to death or divorce than women in Bangladesh.

Within the realm of the Bangladeshi community in Malaysia, we found that Bangladeshi men in Malaysia largely regarded their countrywomen’s migration to Malaysia as a violation of appropriate gender norms. This resulted in stigmatization and rumours about migrant women’s ‘immoral lives’ in Malaysia. Stories written by Bangladeshi men in Malaysia were published in tabloid magazines in Bangladesh. Fear spread throughout the female community and relatives at home questioned the women’s migrations. Disgracing women who are considered to overstep conventional gender roles by taking factory jobs has been conspicuously common in many societies worldwide in the course of history (cf. Massey 1994). It is feared that the power balance between the sexes will be upset and may undermine one’s own position. Gossip is a tool to control women’s actions and is expected to lead to self-regulation.

Another reason why many of the Bangladeshi men resented the presence of Bangladeshi women in Malaysia is related to the bitterness the former felt about their low earnings, their low status and the discrimination they face in Malaysia. While many of the Bangladeshi men and women felt discriminated against and treated disrespectfully by Malaysians, the men were more frequently subjected to verbal abuse and humiliation. Migrant men are often considered more of a threat to the host society than migrant women. The men’s attempts to control ‘their’ women was partly a projection, a tool to preserve their identity in a largely hostile environment. Bangladeshi women’s demeanour and sexuality represented the struggle over the perseverance of traditional values.

Although the Bangladeshi men appreciated certain aspects of Malaysian society, many considered their own Bangladeshi fabric of social norms and traditions to be superior. Nevertheless, the men did adopt certain Malaysian lifestyles. Many Bangladeshi men courted women, most of whom were of Malaysian or Indonesian descent. The men were generally not challenged about or stigmatized for dating. Few men appeared to have qualms about spending large amounts of money on their girlfriends; they referred to their personal and physical needs. Gender norms and definitions of masculinity in both Malaysia and Bangladesh acknowledge men’s physical needs. They do not differ much in this respect, despite the fact that courting is not as openly practised or as widespread in Bangladesh. While continuing to value their own background, women appreciated Malaysian lifestyles, gender norms and behaviour in Malaysia more openly than the men did. Living in Malaysia had increased the women’s self-determination and scope of choices and opportunities. Although they suffered hardship – they missed the advice and support of loved ones at home, and worried about money and job security – many women felt that they had acquired
social skills by looking after themselves and finding their way in a new environment, and many took a lot of pride in that.

However, being socioculturally dually embedded also led to contradictions at a personal level (domain of self). At times, newly acquired ways of being and doing clashed with internalized gendered perceptions. This could lead to confusion and inner conflict. The choices they made felt good – but were they good? The issues that troubled the Bangladeshi women were those that are generally questioned in their community, for example was it a ‘good’ decision to work abroad? Does a ‘good’ woman go to the market? Is it okay to wear Malaysian style (non-revealing clothes)? Is it alright to talk to someone of the opposite sex? Did those who criticized them have a point? Did God approve, or would there be spiritual repercussions? These questions evoked inner struggles. Insecurities and unsettled issues on an individual level influenced women’s interactions with other Bangladeshi women in the household and the community domain.

Despite the Bangladeshi women’s appreciation of Malaysian women’s greater degree of self-determination and their own increased social space – which could include friendly interactions with men – they were often critical about the behaviour of other Bangladeshi women. The atmosphere in many of the women’s hostels was tense; although this was partly because of the overcrowded conditions in these places, it was also a result of the mistrust among the women and the accusations that were made. Several dynamics were at play, highlighting women’s sociocultural bifocality. While many women believed in making their own choices as practised in Malaysia, they feared repercussions from their home community and household, and the impact on their lives once they returned to Bangladesh. Being aware of the hegemonic power of the scandalous stories, some chose to join the dominant discourse to articulate their own moral superiority, portraying themselves as different and ‘good’. At other times, gossiping was an expression of frustration and fear of the consequences of how other women’s behaviour might be perceived by the community.

The dominant Bangladeshi moral system was transplanted to Malaysia by men and women alike. Many women suffered from their countrywomen’s tendency to judge them harshly against the hegemonic standards of the home country, yet most women did exactly the same. Bangladeshi migrant women had redefined the conventional definition of purdah to one that reflects a state of mind that entails a level of trust in rather than control over women, with an emphasis on personal responsibility. However, this ‘new’ meaning of purdah – which was often referred to as relating to self – was generally not extended to other Bangladeshi women.

In time, the magazines stopped publishing scandalous stories and the women carved out avenues of their own choice, particularly relating to marriage. As stated, an important aim of many of the women was to improve their marriage prospects. Many of the unmarried and divorced women thought that their earnings abroad would provide a considerable dowry, which would improve their choice of grooms and ease the related negotiations. Since earnings were lower than anticipated and because of the stigmatization of women in Malaysia via magazine stories, many of the women had started to doubt that their marriage prospects would improve. This
mostly concerned those women who earned less (domain of work) and for whom the pressure to send home money was more acute (domestic domain).

Over the years, the Bangladeshi women and men developed friendships. Marrying someone they had befriended in Malaysia and with whom they had shared their day-to-day problems and challenges became an option. While couples adopted the Malaysian custom of dating, it was moulded to fit the Bangladeshi moral framework of reference. Since courting is ‘not done’ in the Bangladeshi context, marriage was discussed early on in the relationships. To marry was important to the vast majority of the young Bangladeshi women: for an ‘honourable’ woman to be with a man, she must be married to him. While marriage is no guarantee that a woman will not be abandoned, it is generally felt to show a man’s commitment and to legitimize the liaison. Getting married was not always as important to the men; they did not risk their social standing by dating.

The largest concern that aspirant couples had was in the domain of the family, that is, getting their parents or other relatives to approve of their marriage. The roughly thirty women we had come to know better over the course of time and who had married or were engaged to Bangladeshi men they had met in Malaysia can be divided into three groups.

The first group comprises the women who had married with the consent of their parents or planned to do so soon. These women (representing just over a third of the total) had respectful, settled relationships and both partners were content. The men in these relationships had adopted a different view of women and gender roles as a result of their stay in Malaysia; they frequently commented on this and their demeanour exemplified the change in them. For the second group (representing less than a third of the total), things were going less smoothly. They were anxious and unsure about their future with the men they were engaged to or had married. Although things had started out well, the men seemed to have become less committed as time had passed. It was unclear whether things would work out after all. The third group of women consisted of about a quarter of the women who were in a relationship. The men who had promised or had actually married them in Malaysia had abandoned them. The women’s grief was profound; love, honour and money had been lost. Some men had been genuine but had not been able to overcome their parents’ objections to a ‘Malaysian’ marriage; other men seemed not to have had serious intentions from the start.

Many of the women in the last two categories had ‘lent’ Bangladeshi men thousands of ringgits to pay for new documents when they changed factories or if they wanted to stay longer in Malaysia; the women had handed over the money for the sake of their relationships. Other men had taken the money they had received back to their families in Bangladesh. The money thus obtained was a lucrative alternative to their meagre wages. The vulnerable position in which the women in the last two groups found themselves exemplifies the power imbalance between the sexes. While many women’s self-confidence and awareness had increased and they felt that a relationship of their own choosing was justified (inspired by Malaysian gender norms), some women’s choices were strongly influenced by fear of being left out and the desire to be a socially respected married woman, even if that meant...
paying money (instigated by internalized Bangladeshi gender norms). Ironically, despite the women’s disapproval of dowry payments, which they dismissed as being contrary to ‘love’ and equal partnership, many of them had lent men large amounts of money hoping that it would encourage them to commit themselves to marriage – but it often did not. Insecurity, fear of remaining unmarried and internalized views on marriage and femininity had overruled their sense of self-determination (and better judgement, as some said in retrospect). While some men held notions of equal partnership and treated their wives respectfully, others did not.

To understand the full array of reasons underlying the different relational experiences, it would have been necessary to delve deeper into the field of psychology, which was clearly beyond the scope of this study. However, it can be noted that abandonment and deception happened more frequently to those women who had been divorced before they left for Malaysia, which reflects the generally lower social standing of divorcees. Additionally, those Bangladeshi women whose demeanour and actions displayed a deep belief in their self-worth and their right to equal treatment, who put their dignity and self-determination centre stage, even in challenging times, and who would not allow anybody to ‘mess’ with them, were more likely than other women to have sustainable, fulfilling and respectful relationships. More research is needed to adequately understand the reasons behind the differences in women’s fates.

The findings in this study show that sociocultural bifocality – namely a dual sociocultural outlook and orientation – is particularly relevant for temporary migrants who will return to their native country after their contracts expire. Moreover, bifocality is clearly gendered and should be integrated into any analytical framework that is used in migration studies.

10.3 Post-migration stage: back in Bangladesh

Not many studies focus on return migration. Those that do look at the impact of migration on sending countries generally do so in terms of the potential for national economic development. The importance of the economic and social gains derived from men and women’s migrations for their individual households receives less attention.

The few studies on female migration in Asia that have looked at returned migrant women focused on the empowerment potential of migration. These studies, which were largely based on surveys, show that if a woman comes back economically successful, her social position in the community is likely to improve and that many women want to migrate again (Gamburd 2000; Chantavanich et al. 2001). What has generally received limited attention is how migrant women’s lives evolved after their return home, the ways in which their individual and household situations had changed in the short and the long term, what activities they became engaged in and how this related to their initial aims of migration.

For this study, I visited Bangladeshi migrant women both in Malaysia and after their return to Bangladesh, and this gave me the opportunity to follow up on their
lives. A few returned migrant women who all lived in the same neighbourhood in Dhaka were also included in the study. Logistically and time-wise, it was beyond the scope of this study to visit a sufficient number of returned migrant men to compare their experiences with those of the women. More research is needed in this area.

My research assistants and I revisited a number of migrant women and their families over a period of six years, and found that as their situations changed over time, so did the apparent outcomes or perceived consequences of their migration experiences. What might have appeared to be a ‘negative’ outcome at some point could have turned into a more favourable one, or vice versa. This highlights the fact that one cannot merely speak of ‘the’ migration outcome. As outcomes are often complex and can evolve over time, it is important to conduct longitudinal studies (cf. Mahler and Pessar 2006 and Sinke 2006).

Both economic and social criteria were used to assess the migration outcomes. The amount of money that the women remitted varied and was closely related to each woman’s wage level. As in other studies, we found that remittances were largely spent on daily expenditures and that women had little influence on their allocation while they were still in bidesh. The latter sometimes let to frustration, as some money was found to have been spent unwisely or not in line with the migrants’ ideas.

The topic of ‘money’ is clearly value loaded. The more we talked to returned migrant women and their relatives, the more fluctuations and inconsistencies we encountered in the stories told concerning the amount of savings, the investments made and the losses incurred. Some of these differences were a result of the fact that over the years the women had lost track of the actual expenditures; other differences resulted from the women being too embarrassed to be frank with us, especially if they had lost money. Other women wanted to make a point, and exaggerating or underplaying figures served this purpose. In short, the partial or inconsistent representations had social meaning.

Despite their low earnings and the remittances they had sent, many of the women had managed to save some money, which they allocated to their own choosing. Although we did not always manage to get the exact breakdown of savings and expenditures, we did discern some important trends. Our findings show that the allocation of the money and the decision-making process were often gendered.

The migrant women spent a lot of money on consumer goods and gifts to bring back to Bangladesh; doing so is a matter of prestige and obligation in migrant communities throughout the world. Social pressure had led the migrant men and women alike to spend several months’ wages on TVs, VCRs and other luxury goods – even if there was no electricity in their villages. Later, several of the women said that they regretted spending so much on commodities. While they had been in Malaysia, they had considered the occasional woman who had decided not to bring many gifts and commodities back as ‘selfish’ or ‘stingy’; after their return to Bangladesh, however, they referred to these women as having been ‘smart’.

The most valuable items that women brought back for themselves were gold jewellery, which is of special importance when one desires to marry. In addition to its material value, gold also has social and symbolic value. Owning gold made the
women feel more ‘womanly’; it enhanced and confirmed their femininity and prestige and strengthened their fallback position. Many said that they would never sell it, thus highlighting its symbolic meaning. However, some women did sell their gold when times were hard.

Land is a valuable asset and most of the migrants wanted to buy some upon their return. About a third of the 27 women we met repeatedly after their return to Bangladesh had managed to buy land in their own names and thus strengthen their fallback position. For a few of the women, the land was an income-generating investment (rice production).

Building a house or extending their house had been high on the list of many migrants. Twelve of the women had built a house either on their newly acquired land or on their relatives’ land. There were various reasons for building a house. A few simply wanted to be more comfortable, but for most of the women building a house entailed strategic incentives. For some it was an economic investment and a source of income (rent). In addition to being their home, for women without husbands it was a means to live more independently from their relatives. To some of the women who had married men of their own choosing during or after their migration, building a house on their parents’ land was an investment in socio-economic security: if the marriage were to go wrong, it would make returning to the parental home more legitimate and more secure; after all, the women owned the house. Husbands-to-be had not always been in total agreement with their future wives’ investments; the women, however, saw their husbands’ acceptance of their demands as evidence that they were not marrying them just for money. Their choice and the precautions they had taken were intended to make the balance of power in their spousal relationship more equal. In short, building a house had increased the women’s fallback position.

However, gendered restrictions and resistance were frequently encountered in the process of constructing the houses, on practical as well as more fundamental levels. Dealing with contractors is widely considered to be a male affair. Those women who tried to coordinate the construction themselves often faced challenges. Builders or male relatives tried to profit financially from them or charged them more than the usual price, using their superior socio-economic position. Although almost half of the returned migrant women we met in Bangladesh had managed to build a house, many others who had wished to do so had not succeeded as they had not earned enough money or had lost it as a result of failed investments.

Like most migrants worldwide, the Bangladeshi migrant women had also planned to invest their earnings in lucrative businesses in order to have a sustainable source of income. A little more than a third of the returned women succeeded in this. Those who had arrived in Malaysia several years before the Asian economic crisis had been able to save substantially more than those who had arrived just a year prior to the crisis and were more successful in the businesses they had invested in. These businesses included renting out the rooms or shop spaces they had bought or built, tailoring, rearing poultry or other animals, cultivating the land they had bought, providing public transport (two women had bought rickshaws, and one had bought a bus) and lending money. One woman simply lived off the interest she received on her savings.
Some projects failed and the women lost their money. Several of the projects failed as a result of a lack of skill and expertise, or simply because they were risky endeavours. There is an urgent need for migrants to be given institutionalized assistance regarding investments, as has already been argued (cf. Siddiqui & Abrar 2001; de Bruyn & Kuddus 2005:46). At other times, the women’s endeavours had been hindered by sociocultural norms and gender discrimination. In several cases, relatives or the community openly disapproved of the women’s agency and business ventures. In other cases, brothers, husbands or other men abused their relatively powerful position versus women and sabotaged the latter’s businesses; an example of this is the husband who hijacked his wife’s successful tea stall.

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 want to earn their own living. Many relatives felt that they had a natural right to the earnings of ‘their’ women and sometimes verbally abused women for what was perceived to be their ‘selfish’ behaviour. Many of these women felt both socially and emotionally isolated. A few of the women reassessed their initial decisions and gave in to the pressure exerted by their relatives. Nevertheless, the women tried to better their lives and – as we observed by visiting them over the years – perseverance led to improvements in most of their lives as time passed. In their struggles, women implicitly and explicitly renegotiated the meaning of gendered norms on what constitutes appropriate behaviour for women. Boundaries were slowly but steadily stretched and moved.

Apart from the aforementioned allocations of earnings, there is a monetary issue that is rarely mentioned in the literature, namely that money goes missing. There was often a considerable sum of money that had been ‘lost’ or was perceived as ‘wasted’, as the women called it. Some of the missing money was a result of theft or the allocation of remittances by relatives towards ends that the women did not approve of, such as spending it ‘lavishly’ instead of educating the children or buying land. A considerable amount of money was also lost as a result of the ‘loans’ the women had made to their husbands-to-be, often while they were in Malaysia. In cases where the marriage took place and the relationship continued, the investment was soon forgotten and thus not perceived as a ‘loss’. After all, the social goal of marriage had been attained; it had been a beneficial social investment in the eyes of the woman – although her relatives sometimes had a very different opinion. It was found that at least a quarter of the women we met in Bangladesh had lost money by giving it to prospective husbands who then disappeared. The amounts were substantial, namely 50,000–100,000 takas (approximately 1000–2000 euros). These women were left not only unmarried but also socially and economically isolated; their situation was severe.

Other migrant women said that if their wages had been fair and there had not been all the stigmatization, not so many women would have been inclined to try and change their fate by ‘catching’ a man. Although it is indeed very likely that fewer women would have made these kinds of social investments, some of the women who had earned good money had made similar choices. The difference, however, is
that these women could amend this choice, as they had sufficient money left to invest in different ways in order to ensure their future security.

Thus, the women invested their earnings in economic security as well as social security. Economic investments that were geared to improving a woman’s fall-back position and her ability to generate income often brought more benefits than investing in social security, such as potential future husbands. The economic security investments the women made stretched gender boundaries, thereby improving their socio-economic space.

In a society like Bangladesh, however, where women are often dependent on social protection, social investments are very significant. There is a distinct difference between social security investments that are mutually beneficial and frequently entail tangible assets in which women’s ownership is established (e.g. a house), and social security investments that make women more vulnerable, such as investments made in order to ‘catch’ a potential husband. The latter type of social security investment is often instigated by fear that the potential husband will otherwise leave; this fear is rooted in internalized notions of gender roles, inequality and marriage. Conventional gender norms are thus perpetuated. Economic and social goals and aspirations are clearly interlinked. Migrant women’s potential investments in economic and in social security should therefore be included in future frameworks of migration analyses.

Many women’s social goals of migration were in some way related to the marriage institution. Of the 27 women we visited in Bangladesh, two thirds had wanted to marry a man of their own choosing. Almost half of the women we talked with in Bangladesh had managed to attain this goal as a consequence of their migration. Most of these marriages appeared to us to be harmonious and happy, and were accepted by the in-laws. The women were clearly respectful of their in-laws; they were often pious and lived up to the image of a ‘good’ wife and daughter-in-law. In turn, they were respected for the knowledge and life experiences they had gained. A few of the married women who while in Malaysia had felt unsure about the future of their marriages continued to feel uncertain about their husbands’ commitment.

Some of the divorced and widowed women had been resolved not to remarry; for them, migration had been a way to circumvent marriage by becoming economically independent. Four of these women had not remarried, while one of the younger woman had not been able to avoid remarriage. The determination and firmness she had shown by migrating, and that consequently had improved her decision-making power, had however yielded some result. Her marriage had taken place under her conditions: she and her husband were living with her parents.

Several married women had migrated to escape unhappy marriages, conflict and abuse. Those who had consciously striven to become economically independent had fared well, while many of those who had been in a similar marital situation but had defined their migration primarily as ‘getting away’ from it all remained unhappy in

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1. Four of these women had discussed their relationships with us while they had been in Malaysia. Three of the other women we met in Bangladesh had been hesitant while in bidesh to discuss the matter.
their marriages; fights and even physical abuse continued. They avoided divorce because they feared socio-economic vulnerability; some were also emotionally attached to their husbands. Several contemplated migrating again. Migration, once more, was seen as an escape route.

Many women had been a little anxious about being stigmatized upon their return from bidesh. I found that at least a third of the migrant women had suffered from stigmatization, bad-mouthing and gossip after their return. Mothers were stigmatized for leaving their children behind. Although several mothers had planned to invest their earnings in their children’s future (i.e. to educate them and then marry them off to suitable grooms), few had managed to do so. Not only had their wages been too low, but also during their absence some children had dropped out of school, and some daughters had been married off by relatives without the mothers’ consent. Mothers suffered immensely over the fates of their children, and this often resulted in feelings of guilt and shame. If children were not doing well, it was blamed on the women’s migration. On a more positive note, the returned women shared their newly acquired experiences and insights with their children. Those who were having babies for the first time talked extensively about how they planned to educate their daughters. Further research should investigate the full scope of the impact that migration has on the children of migrant women.

The five unmarried or divorced women who had failed to marry or become economically successful suffered the most from stigmatization. A few had left their villages to look for work in Dhaka. Apart from being in economic distress, they had been socially isolated and felt that they no longer fitted in, and they could not bear the insulting comments made by villagers and relatives. Many were bitter that they were so harshly judged for not having husbands. Finding a job in Dhaka to sustain themselves was a dire need. They still felt that they were ‘between’ the past and a better post-migration future. When we last met these women, they were still frantically looking for jobs.

Other unmarried women who had been more successful in building their lives economically also encountered criticism. This had less to do with having been a migrant woman than with being a woman on their own, doing things differently and implicitly challenging traditional gender roles. These women’s perseverance eventually resulted in more harmonious and respectful relations, even though they did not have husbands.

Although many of the women had experienced stigmatization, equally as many had gained in social standing and prestige not only because of their economic success, but also because of their ‘new’ personality and increased human capital, namely their newly acquired knowledge and experience. They were often referred to by relatives and neighbours as being ‘smart’ and having ‘knowledge’. Women combined these assets with a deliberately pious demeanour, which had a positive effect on their marriages and their position in the household.

On a personal level, many of the women felt that they had learned a lot through their migration experience and had gained new social skills. They were more self-confident and took pride in their achievements. In combination with their economic assets, this had a positive impact on the power balance within their marriage. A
couple of the women whose migrations had not led to the desired result cherished their personal gains in social skills and knowledge and hoped to use these for their future benefit.

Many women desired to remain economically active in order not only to improve their economic situation but also to engage in activities in which they take pride. After settling down again in Bangladesh, almost two thirds of the women became engaged in some income generating activity; for almost a third this was a necessity. Four of the women would have liked to engage in an income generating activity, but their husbands or relatives did not approve. As many as a third of the returned women we talked to seriously considered migrating again and doing things differently this time, especially where the allocation of their earnings was concerned. Yet, as far as I know this desire did not materialize for any of them. The lack of resources, the unwillingness of relatives to assist them financially, the lack of reliable agents and of affordable visas and work permits for respectable jobs were important reasons for this. They and the many women we encountered in Dhaka and surrounding areas who desired to migrate in order to improve their lives would greatly benefit from migration schemes supported by the government and under the protection of national and international laws. For some, however, migration became a concept, a dream of escaping; it was something to ease their day-to-day suffering, but not something to be endorsed – because essentially they wanted to remain in Bangladesh.

In sum, the migration of Bangladeshi women is driven by both economic and social goals, and these goals are often interlinked. Many strive to gain economically in order to increase their social standing by either improving their marriage prospects or being able to live dignified lives without husbands. In their attempts to do so, they encounter various obstacles of economic and sociocultural origin.

On an economic level, three types of obstacles can be identified: a) the migrant institution and the exorbitant migration fees, which were sometimes lost; b) the level of wages while abroad, which were low because of the ‘migrant labour regime’ in Malaysia and the consequences of the Asian financial crisis, which reinforced the workings of the ‘migrant labour regime’; this resulted in wages that were significantly lower than had been promised and stipulated in their contracts; and c) a lack of business expertise and assistance in Bangladesh, which resulted in the failure of projects or in investments in risky business endeavours, such as relatives’ migrations.

On a sociocultural level, obstacles can be divided into external challenges (the domestic and community domains) and internal challenges (the domain of self). As for the former, women faced opposition for stretching – or as it was perceived by opponents, transgressing – gender boundaries by being economically active and powerful. Male relatives and other men often tried to obtain access to women’s earnings by exercising their relatively greater sociocultural power. Other means of attempting to rectify hegemonic gender roles and power relations included both verbal and physical abuse. The pressure of hegemonic notions of marriage, and the concomitant negative connotation and low social prestige of ‘being without a husband’, was a major challenge to many of the returned women.
On an individual level, several women were challenged by pursuing the individual socio-economic goals to which they felt entitled (sometimes strengthened by their sociocultural bifocal experience in Malaysia) while being infused by internalized conventional gender notions of marriage, which sometimes resulted in social security investments that were not beneficial. As for the outcomes of migration, economic gain and success was most tangible in terms of such assets as land, houses, gold and sustainable business investments. The women who had failed economically were clearly most prone to stigmatization and social exclusion. For them, migration had not yielded the envisioned results; instead, many faced a situation that was economically and socially severe.

Social gains were made in three interrelated areas: in the realm of marriage (some of the women now have a good marriage), in terms of social standing within the domestic and the community domain (irrespective of their marital status) and in the realm of social gains, as experienced on the level of self.

As studies on female migration have highlighted, the multiple facets and complex nature of women’s positions and situations preclude unidimensional conclusions concerning the possible gains and losses resulting from migration (Anthias 2000:37; Mahler & Pessar 2001:455; Morokvasic 1984:893, 2003:128; Mahler & Pessar 2006). ‘Yes/No’ questions concerning emancipation are prone to evoke a flat analysis and discussions that centre on dichotomies, such as empowerment versus disempowerment or gains versus losses. They leave little room for the many grey areas and ambiguities within an individual migrant’s complex lived reality. By looking at individual women’s experiences, this study aimed to account for these grey areas and potential contradictory experiences. The consequences of women’s migration were obviously not unequivocally positive, yet about two thirds of the women we visited in Bangladesh had somehow managed to enlarge their social, economic and personal space through their migration experiences. While this proportion is not representative of all migrant women, the analysis of their experiences highlights important gender dynamics.

10.4 Towards a new analytical model

As this study has shown, to thoroughly understand the migration incentives, experiences and consequences of temporary migrant women and men, any analytical framework should incorporate the aspects that are summarized below. It is the very connection between, the interface of agency and structure that helps to reveal migration dynamics and experiences. To discern this interface for analytical purposes, it is instructive to look at migrant’s individual experiences and to distinguish four relevant domains, namely that of self (the individual level), the domestic domain (the household), the domain of work and that of community (see model 10.1). This study has shown that migration is not a gender-neutral process in which men and women have similar motivations and migration experiences or experience sociocultural dual embeddedness similarly.
The findings thus highlight the importance of incorporating gender in migration theory and integrating it in any analyses. Since gender does not constitute a separate system but pervades all levels of society, to engender migration theory a gendered lens needs to be built into all levels of analyses. Moreover, if we wish to fully understand migrants’ experiences, both migrant men and migrant women should be incorporated in migration studies.

This study has also shown that gender relations are not fixed, clearly demarcated or unambiguous. Therefore, any analytical framework should approach gender as the dynamic variable that it is. Gender notions and definitions vary not only over time and space but also among individuals. Our findings also highlight the fact that temporary migration calls for an analytical framework that incorporates at least all three stages of the migration cycle. Of particular relevance to temporary migration is the sociocultural bifocality of migrants and the impact this has on their decisions, actions and perceptions in both the sending and the home country.

Figure 10.1: Understanding the migration process

The fact that the women had managed to migrate in their own right reflects a redefinition of gender norms and roles. Women’s migration clearly evokes controversies. Their dual sociocultural embeddedness (their bifocal orientation while in Malaysia)
led to new or enhanced perceptions of definitions of femininity. Yet there are no clear-cut statements to be made concerning the emancipatory or gender-equality enhancing potential that migration may have. Analytical frameworks should therefore allow for grey areas and seemingly contradictory findings, which ultimately reveal the determining dynamics. To this end, both social and economic aspects – that is, the incentives, aspirations and outcomes – should be incorporated and investigated, and the level of agency as well as that of structure should be recognized as equally important in defining migrant’s experiences and situations.

On a structural level, it is important to understand the underlying factors that contribute to the migration system. These are economic, political and sociocultural factors that are related to the sending and the receiving country as well to as the global arena, which informs migration streams and the formation of migrant institutions. On the level of the receiving country, it is important to understand the prevalent migrant labour regime, both in itself and in relation to other prevalent labour regimes. The hiring of temporary migrant workers has increased as a result of international competition and the search for ever increasing profits and decreasing costs for sharply priced commodities as favoured by consumers in industrialized countries. Because of their weak legal status, which allows employers to reduce their labour costs, temporary migrant workers are particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. There is no doubt that globalization, which creates the opportunity to migrate, is flawed by the lack of legal protection and law enforcement on the national level of migrant sending and receiving countries, as well as the international level, namely in relation to UN conventions and their ratification and enforcement.

Having said this, however, it is equally important to acknowledge factors of individual agency as it is to recognize the limitations imposed by structural forces. As this study has shown, individual incentives and contextualized experiences influence migration decisions and experiences; structural forces intermingle with personal desires, culminating in migration. Individuals are engaged in a complex of activities that are embedded within while simultaneously transforming practices of globalization. Hence, migration is both a cause and a consequence of that process. In other words, apart from understanding the underlying systems and structures, it is instructive to look at migrants’ personal experiences. Although adverse structural conditions had impacted the women’s migration outcome (i.e. the amount of money they had been able to remit or save) and left some of them bereft and in dire need, others had nonetheless gained both economically and socially from their migrations.

This finding does not downplay the unjust work and payment conditions, or the urgent need for improvements in this realm that governments, employers, recruitment agents, consumers and others actors should be calling for. It does, however, promote the acknowledgement and exploration of the actual experiences and lived realities of migrants and returnees who try to negotiate the contradictions and the adverse conditions that they experience. While often subject to unfair conditions, they are more than mere victims: their choices and efforts deserve due recognition. Moreover, a person’s agency should be assessed from within his or her own context. It is therefore important for researchers to listen to the stories and perceptions of the migrants before interpreting their lives from their own points of reference and ideo-
logies. Agency can also include actions that are intended to improve the well-being of others, respect social and moral norms, or fulfil personal commitments. The full array of factors that influence how a migrant acts and reacts (or chooses not to), and his or her motives for doing so, can become apparent only by considering the migrant’s agency in a broad sense.

This study started with the words of Kofi Anan, namely: ‘Migration is a courageous expression of an individual’s will to overcome adversity and live a better life.’ Many people throughout the world are engaged in this adventure. I hope that by drawing attention to their lives and their life stories, this study will make a contribution – however small – to improving their fates.