Working gendered boundaries: temporary migration experiences of Bangladeshi women in the Malaysian export industry from a multi-sited perspective
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Although it is commonly believed that international migration largely concerns people migrating from ‘poor’ countries in the southern hemisphere to ‘rich’ countries in the northern Hemisphere, South to South migration is almost as voluminous. Asia (including the Middle East) is a case in point: it hosts about one third of all international migrants.

This study focuses on the migration experiences of Bangladeshi women who temporarily moved to Malaysia to work in labour-intensive factories. Although the scope of labour migration and the relevant immigration policies may differ from country to country, labour migration within Asia is characterized by several salient commonalities: documented labour is virtually always temporary and strictly regulated, most of it is South to South migration and there is a feminization of migration. The relevance of this study is related to the aforementioned commonalities.

In migration discussions, the focus is generally on South to North migration. This is reflected in the migration literature. Studies generally concentrate on permanent migration and on issues related to border control and integration into the host country. There is, however, a fundamental difference between the permanent or settlement migration that is prominent in Europe and North America, and the temporary or circular migration as currently witnessed in Asian and Middle Eastern countries, where migrant workers cannot obtain citizenship. These differences are generally not acknowledged in theoretical discourses on migration. This study fills this gap in our understanding by focusing on temporary migration processes, which are equally or sometimes even more important in terms of volume and contributions to countries of origin.

Although women now make up a numerical majority in many cross-border flows, including those in Asia, research on international migration has overwhelmingly focused on men. While an increasing number of migration scholars now insist that migration is a gendered phenomenon that requires more sophisticated theoretical and analytical tools, there has been little concerted effort to integrate gender into theories of international migration theory.

This study integrates gender relations into the conceptual and analytical framework. The study focuses on why Bangladeshi women migrated and how their experiences impacted their lives during their migration and after their return. The fieldwork was carried out in both Malaysia and Bangladesh and covered the pre-migration phase, the migration phase and the post-migration phase. In order to better understand the gender dynamics involved, the experiences of Bangladeshi migrant men are incorporated whenever relevant and possible.
While many migration scholars argue that women’s migrations are largely sacrificial (the women migrate because they feel responsible for their families), others have shown that many women migrate to escape constraining or abusive situations and to better their lives. There are no universal or clear-cut answers as to why women migrate. Individuals’ motivations differ, as do their social contexts. This study shows 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) and gendered labour relations were important incentives for migration for most of the women with whom we spoke. Within this structural context, individual motivations and incentives played major roles. During the survey and initial interviews, many women stated that the main reason for their migration had been economic and was primarily related to helping their family. However, the numerous informal discussions we had during the study made it clear that the actual situation was very often 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 the researchers increased and they felt more at ease within the Bangladeshi Malaysian community, different stories were told; these revealed that while some women had migrated primarily for the benefit of others, most also had reasons of their own. Many women were individually motivated to overcome gender impasses (most of which were related to the marriage institution) in order to enlarge their own social and economic space. Hence, their migrations were not mere reflections of gender oppression but often also a result of their determination to improve their lives. It is the very connection between, the interface of, agency and structure that helps to reveal migration dynamics and experiences.

As studies on transnationalism have shown, migrants often retain a ‘dual frame of reference’, a dual orientation towards the ‘here’ (the host country) and the ‘there’ (the country of origin). Gender roles, values and norms often differ in the receiving country from those in the home country. Concomitant adaptations are not always welcomed by all. Within the realm of the Bangladeshi community in Malaysia, the Bangladeshi men largely regarded their countrywomen’s migration to Malaysia as a violation of appropriate gender norms. This resulted in stigmatization and in rumours about migrant women’s ‘immoral lives’ in Malaysia. Fear spread throughout the female community and relatives at home questioned the women’s migrations.

Living in Malaysia had increased the women’s self-determination and scope of choices and opportunities. 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. 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 themsel-
ves as different and ‘good’ as opposed to other ‘bad’ women. Nevertheless, 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. Moreover, their dual sociocultural embeddedness (their bifocal orientation while in Malaysia) led to new or enhanced perceptions of definitions of femininity.

The migration of Bangladeshi women is driven by both economic and social goals, and the 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 both while they are abroad and after their return to Bangladesh.

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, the Asian financial crisis, and the lack of adequate policies and law enforcement to protect the rights of migrant workers and to ensure equal treatment; 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 to returned migrants, 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 severe economic and social problems.
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.

The findings of the study 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, a gendered lens needs to be built into all levels of analyses in order to engender migration theory. 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. The findings also highlight the fact that temporary migration calls for an analytical framework that incorporates all three stages of the migration cycle. Of particular relevance to temporary migration is the socio-cultural bifocality of migrants and the impact this has on their decisions, actions and perceptions in both the sending and the home countries.

The multiple facets and complex nature of women’s positions and situations preclude unidimensional conclusions concerning the possible gains and losses resulting from migration. ‘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 the experiences of individual women, this study aimed to account for these grey areas and potentially 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.