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### Short-Term Labour Migration of Women and Gender Relationships: The Bangladesh Case

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As in any other South Asian country, women in Bangladesh have traditionally been outside those spheres of social, political and economic lives that were linked to resources and power. Dominant economic and social institutions have been successful in sustaining the situations of powerlessness and resourcelessness of women in Bangladesh, among other things, through maintaining a strict public-private division of labour within a family. Since the early 1970s major socioeconomic changes have occurred that have created condition where, an increasing number of women began to break away from the traditional gender based public-private divide of work, particularly in the rural society of Bangladesh. Their presence in the monetised and public spheres is reflected in the labour market surveys (Bhattacharya, 1994)<sup>i</sup>. A substantial section of the female labour force is also crossing international boundaries and migrating to different destinations on employment. By the 1990s Bangladeshi women became quite visible in the short-term labour markets of oil rich middle-eastern countries and the growing economies of South East Asia. This paper examines impacts of international labour migration of women on gender relationships within household in Bangladesh.

Major assumptions of this paper are (a) women's participation in the monetised sphere outside home will make them visible in the role of bread-earners or providers; (b) it will make their personal resource base stronger and thus decrease their economic dependence on men; and consequently, (c) it will alter the traditional power-relationship between sexes and contribute towards establishing a more equal partnership.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first section highlights the conceptual and methodological issues. The second presents macro level context of female migration from Bangladesh. The third section makes a cost-benefit analysis of female migration and locates how it has affected the perception of family members regarding the role of women migrants. The final section analyses the impact of migration on family decision making process and on division of labour within households.

## **Conceptual and Methodological Issues**

The twenty-first century has been identified by some of the migration experts as the age of migration (Castles and Miller, 1998). Therefore, studying different aspects of migration is of immense importance. Migration theories can be divided into two broad heads. The first group of theories has emerged to explain why do people migrate, and the second group analyzes different impacts of migration. Although a well researched area in migration studies, in the initial years, impact analysis has been mainly undertaken by the economists. These studies concentrated on macro or micro level economic impacts of migration. Macro economic impact analysis was done either on receiving countries or on sending countries. Impact on production and impact on wage rate are the two major indicators used in macro economic studies (Nayyer 1994, Mahmood 1996). Impact studies on migration at micro economic level have focussed on the costs of individual migration and the benefits received at the individual, family and community levels, rather than that of the economy as a whole (Berry and Soligo, 1969, LeClere and McLaughlin, 1992). At a later stage, sociologists, political scientists, geographers, and environmentalists engaged themselves with migration issues. Each of the disciplines added new dimensions.

Not many studies are available that has analysed the impact of female migration. In traditional literature, migrant workers are perceived as young, economically motivated male workers. Women, if at all involved in migration, were perceived to do so, by accompanying their spouses. In ILO instruments, the family of the migrant workers is defined as "his wife or minor children".<sup>ii</sup> Therefore women were only considered within the framework of family reunification. Such conceptualisation automatically classifies women as dependents, rather than principal migrants. As spouses and daughters they assumed to have 'non-economic' reproductive roles, and husbands and fathers are responsible for satisfying the 'economic needs' of the family. From mid-1970s some studies were initiated gauging the extent, pattern and nature of female migration. These

studies demonstrated that family reunification does account for a large number of cases of female migration. Women have also migrated at an equal scale as independent migrants. Moreover, in recent time, globalization has added a new dimension to female migration, upto the extent that a trend of feminization has emerged in some of the labour exporting countries. This has led to a realization among academics and international organizations that the impact and consequences of female migration should be studied with equal, if not more importance to those regarding men.

Gradually, the impact of female migration became one of the areas of investigation in migration literature. In most cases, however, these studies focused on developed receiving countries and generally looked into the impact of migration on migrant women themselves. Tienda and Booth (1991), UN ed. (1993), LeClere and McLaughlin (1992) have studied impact of migration on women's empowerment process. These studies concluded that migration both increases and decreases women's power vis-a-vis men. When women move to less oppressive socioeconomic environment or when migration raises her earning and increases her mobility, it results in increased empowerment of women. However, migration decreases women's power when it reduces her work opportunity and disrupts family ties.

This paper treats relationship between genders as cultural construction on the basis of biological differences. Women's empowerment is treated as a process through which such cultural construction of subordinate position of women is challenged. There are some very important elements in short-term female labour migration that can play a potential role in redefining gender relationships. For example, migration increases women's income substantially. It decreases women's economic dependence on men and can lead to formation of relatively higher independent asset base of women. It places women in a provider's role. All these may contribute to increased levels of self-respect, esteem and dignity. The end result of this process could be a more egalitarian gender relationship that accepts the differences between men and women, but proves again that the previous state of role differentiation among them and consequent subordination of one sex to the other, is culturally constructed.

This paper has used data generated for a larger study on temporary labour migration of women of Bangladesh.<sup>iii</sup> In understanding the impacts of migration on gender relations, both longitudinal and situation analysis techniques can be adopted. This study used the latter. It involved the situation analysis of migrant house-holds before, during and after migration through a process of memory recollection of selected interviewees.

This represents household level data of 200 international female migrants. 150 of them are those who have returned to Bangladesh on completion of their overseas employment. The rest 50 are those households in which the female migrants were still residing abroad. The first group of female migrants from now on will be referred to as returnee female migrants and the second group as non-returnee female migrants. In case of returnee households both returnee migrants and their family members constituted the information source, while in case of non-returnees only household members constituted sources of information. Both structured questionnaire (quantitative and qualitative data) and informal discussions (qualitative data) were conducted. Six women migrant prone areas where the field work took place are Dohar, Nababganj, Manikganj, Dhaka, Narayanganj and Daudkandi. Of the two hundred interviewees, 130 were from rural areas and 70 were from urban areas.

## **The Bangladesh Context**

Bangladesh is a huge labour surplus country and therefore mainly belongs to the supply side of the global labour market. During the 1990s on an average 225,000 Bangladeshis went abroad on short-term employment annually (Table:1) A large number of Bangladeshis go abroad on an undocumented status. Therefore, the actual figure of persons going abroad from the country is much higher than the official statistics suggest. Migrant labour constitutes 4% of the total labour force of Bangladesh. They have a major contribution in the economic development of the country. About 25% of the total foreign exchange earning come from this source. Its contribution

in financing import amount to 22 percent (1998-99), and to GDP is 4 percent during the 1990's (IOM 2000, ILO 2001).

Women's participation in the international labour force as principal migrants from Bangladesh is a new phenomenon. It is only in the 1990s that one hears about migration of women on a significant scale. There is however, no gender-segregated data on migration flow. Manual consolidation of information by Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) of the Ministry of Labour, the Government of Bangladesh indicates that from 1991 to 2000, approximately 13500 women have migrated. The number is very insignificant. If compared to the total flow of migrants from Bangladesh this figure is less than 1% (Table 2). However studies have shown (IOM/INSTRAW, 1999; Siddiqui 2000) that the extent of female migration from Bangladesh is much higher than the official figure. Female migration from Bangladesh mostly takes place through unofficial channels. Various factors have contributed to such irregular migration. From the 1980s onward successive governments of Bangladesh either put a ban on, or restricted movements of certain categories of women in the international labour market. At present, professional and skilled women can migrate as principal migrants, but semi-skilled and unskilled women cannot go overseas without a male guardian. At a certain point, a complete ban on migration of women was imposed,<sup>iv</sup> that was subsequently withdrawn.<sup>v</sup> Besides, cumbersome procedure of legal migration, development of parallel channels that are less time consuming, promulgation of different circulars/notifications strongly prohibiting others from participating in the trade excepts the licensed recruiting agencies<sup>vi</sup>, and inability of the state in implementing its laws have resulted in major flow of irregular migration of women from Bangladesh. Representatives of some travel agencies involved in facilitating unofficial migration of women, estimated that their total number should be at least ten times more than the official figure.<sup>vii</sup>

## **Economic Empowerment and Women's Status**

After forming a general idea about migration from Bangladesh and the extent of women's participation in it, this section deals with the level of changes, if any, in the perception of family members regarding their economic role. The section starts with presenting some basic information on the 200 female migrants and their households.

### ***Basic Information***

The female migrants were found to be relatively young when they first migrated. 58 percent were less than 25 years of age and 76 percent were less than 30 years (Table 3.). The female migrants represented mixed marital status. 50 percent of the female migrants were married, 15.5 percent unmarried, 25.5 percent were either divorced or deserted and 9 percent were widows (Table 4). Migrant woman's family is defined as a group of persons who reside in the same compound and eat food prepared in the same kitchen. The average family size of these migrants was 5.28 (Table 5). In case of non-returnee migrant's family, female migrant has also been accounted for in the family size, although she resided overseas.

Kuwait and the UAE constituted major countries of destination of these interviewee female migrants, followed by Malaysia and Bahrain. Though Saudi Arabia is the major destination of Bangladeshi male migrant workers, only a handful of female migrants went there. There is a correlation between occupation and countries of destination of the female migrants (Table 6). A majority of the garment workers went to the UAE. Malaysia was almost the sole country of destination for those who worked in different manufacturing factories other than garment. 70 percent of the nurses also went to Malaysia. UAE and Kuwait were the major countries of destination for domestic workers, cleaners and those who took up secretarial positions. Educational background of the female migrants demonstrates that as many as 47.5 percent of

them were illiterate. Another 26 percent studied up to Class V and 19.5 percent up to Class X. Only 6.5 percent had higher secondary degree (Table 7).

### ***Economics of Migration***

Migration has created three types of economic results in the case of these 200 households. These are positive, negative and mixed. This is assessed on the basis of some selected indicators. These are: length of stay abroad, flow of remittance, status of borrowing, increase or decrease in land size, homestead condition, level of savings and ability to invest in business. Overall positive results does not necessarily entail that a family has gained in all the indicators mentioned above. A family might have experienced negative results in a few areas. Still the gains from other sectors may have more than balanced those negative impacts and thus produced an overall positive economic result. Mixed results are those in which positive and negative impacts are distributed in such a manner that one neutralises the impact of the other. It was found that for 114 migrant families, migration brought about an overall positive impact. For 53 families the economic impact of migration was negative, and it had mixed impact in case of 33 families.

The average cost of migration stood at Tk. 43,413 per women migrant. The figure includes all kinds of expenses, ranging from airfare, passport, visa, insurance and medical check-up to incidental charges like transport, shoes and suitcase (Table 8). The cost of female migration is much less if compared with that of male migration. A similar study (IOM, 2000) on male migration in Bangladesh found that their average cost stood at Tk.76,523.50.

On an average each of the female migrants stayed overseas for 3.26 years and annually remitted Tk. 45,207.84. Besides the cash flow, a significant amount of remittance was also transferred to these families in kind. While returning home after finishing their contracts or coming on holidays the female migrants brought with a number items. They include cassette recorder, VCR, VCP, television, radio, camera, fan, kitchen utensils and gold. In monetary terms the estimated value of the items brought along per migrant was Tk.4,068.70. The remittances sent in the first year was required to recover the migration cost, while the income from subsequent years was the return on their investment.

It is important to note that during migration period more than 60 percent of the female migrants became the principal earner of their families. Remittances sent by these women constituted substantial part of their family's expenditure. 55.65 percent of the remittances went into subsistence, health care and education (Table 9). 157 interviewee households took loans for financing migration of these women. 68.15 percent of them had fully paid off the loans, another 23.26 percent had partially paid back and only 8.28 percent were not able to do so. Their remittances were also used in constructing new buildings and renovating old structures. 36 persons have constructed new homes, and 17 other families have been able to repair their homestead.

In the Bangladesh context land is considered to be the most secure avenue of investment. 3.34 percent of the total remittances were spent by 37 families in purchasing land. A section of the female migrants stated that one of the reasons for their migration was to facilitate migration of other family members. Remittance has played a role in financing migration of family members of 15 of these women. In 5 instances it was the brother of the female migrants, in 1 case it was the son and in rest of the cases it was their husbands who migrated. Husbands, brothers or sons of migrant women, for establishing or running their businesses, used a section of remittance. 6.90 percent of the remittances was kept aside by the families as savings.

### ***Women's Status in Family***

Economic upliftment of family through women's income affected their status in many ways. It increased their respect within family. Most of the family members were appreciative of their role.

In case of married families, both migrant women and their husbands pointed out that together they had certain desires in life. Female migration provided them with the opportunity to fulfill some of those desires. The cost female migration was almost half to that of male. This, among other things, prompted the families to decide in favour of female migration. In such condition, migration of woman member, was part of a family strategy where female members earned the income, male members ensured its utilization. In such situations family became a unit of partnership of husband, wife, children and elderly members.

Unmarried, deserted and divorcee women also mentioned that after migration male members of their families (fathers or brothers) treated them with more respect. In normal scenario they were mostly perceived to be burdens on the family. This was because families would have to pay for dowry for marriage of unmarried girls and expenses for maintenance of deserted/divorcee women, in most of cases with children. In the changed scenario these women became alternative income sources for the families. On occasions, these women not only managed their own dowry money and did the same for their younger sisters.<sup>viii</sup> On some other occasions, brothers set up their own homes once they got married and refused to take the responsibility of their parents. It was the income of these women that helped maintain the subsistence of the parents. Parents of this group of migrants did view them (migrant women) as bread earners.

Importance and respect for mother increased substantially to the children of widow, deserted and divorcee women migrants. Some children pointed out after their father passed away or deserted them they were brought up as dependents of grandparents or uncles. Living on their mother's income gave them a sense of self-respect and dignity. They appreciated what their mothers had done for them.

Although a section of the parents and some young children of migrant women could easily accept their daughters in providers' role, husbands did not feel comfortable to recognise women as the principal bread earner of the family. They tend to view the situation as an exceptional one for a short period of time with a specific purpose in mind, i.e., one time accumulation of resources for the family. Once the women return, the situation should change. The discomfort of men seeing women in the providers role to some extent gets reinforced by their extended family and wider society. Members of extended family and society tend to put down these men for "living off of their wives". These factors inhibit men to recognise women as providers even during the period of migration, when women are the principal earners of the households concerned.

Migration brought certain changes within the migrant women as well. They felt a degree of satisfaction for being able to shoulder financial responsibility of the family in a major way. On occasions, migration may not have produced overall positive economic results, yet experience of migration brought positive changes in some of these women. It made them more confident and capable of taking control of situations.

As stated earlier in 16.5 percent households migration produced negative economic results. In some cases migration experiences of women may have been economically successful but their children suffered grave consequences in their absence. The negative results of migration that affected gender relations are discussed below.

Eight migrant women stayed abroad for less than six months. Of them, two returned within weeks. There are some others who stayed abroad for less than a year. These women had to come back before finishing their contracts for many reasons. These include: forged travel documents, closure of factories, non-receipt of salary, verbal, physical and sexual abuse, health problems or problems of adjustment. Their investment in migration was wasted. These women suffered from extreme feeling of guilt for putting their families in economic hardship. In most cases families were also unsympathetic to them and blamed the migrant women for their misfortune.

There are a few examples when women's migration might have been an economically successful endeavour, yet the families suffered severe setbacks in other areas. Breaking up marriage, children dropping out of schools, getting mixed up in wrong crowd and becoming drug addicts were seen by these women as outcome of their absence from the household. They tended to

blame themselves for all the wrongs that had happened at home. It was felt that to a great extent, the family and society had also contributed to the burden of guilt on them. By these acts they were able to curtail the sense of achievement of the migrant women and reinforce traditional values that place women in such roles as child bearing and rearing, and looking after the households. A comparison of level of drop out, and drug addiction in women migrant families with that of national rates of course did demonstrate that the number of cases are not higher in women migrant producing households. This is because of the supportive roles played by the extended families, particularly by the elderly women of those families.

## **Impact of Migration on Family Decision Making and Division of Labour**

Till now this paper tried to locate the changes that have occurred in the perception of the family members and to some extent society regarding women's role. In this section, an attempt has been made to understand manifestation of women's empowerment in two broad areas. These are (a) family decision making process, and (b) division of labour within family. This has been seen at two levels: during migration and upon return. First the role of women in family decision making will be discussed.

### ***Family Decision Making***

During Migration: Women migrants pointed out that they had some specific goals behind their decision to migrate. Some were personal goals, others they shared with their family members. They personally wanted to ensure better health and educational opportunities for the family, create opportunities for better marriages for family members and construct their own homes. Along with their families they wanted to improve economic condition of families through purchase of land, investing in business etc. For diversifying family income, they also wanted to send other family members abroad. Through utilization of the remittances sent by the female migrants, many families could fulfill these plans, either fully or partially. Nonetheless, materialisation of plans took place more in those cases where other family members, particularly the male members felt the same way.

The female migrants however faced difficulties regarding keeping control over the use of remittance. Most of them, except those in nurse category, did not have bank accounts in the host countries and also in some cases they did not feel secure to keep money in the host countries. Therefore, they remitted most of their earnings home. Family members who had access to their remittance were mostly men. They did not always keep in mind what the female migrants wanted to do with it. They used those according to their own priorities. A section of the families, however, with the aim of diversifying income sources sent women members abroad by selling family properties. These families treated migrant women's income as family income.

A section of the women migrants felt that a portion of their remittance was misused. Family members sometimes made involuntary contributions to friends and relatives, or their husbands took away their money and abandoned them. In others, their families spent remittances in luxury goods. The misuse of remittances, speaks more about disorganised migration than that of male/female power relationship. The male migrants also face the same problem with their remittances. However, the total amount misused in case of the women migrants was not large, it amounted to 3 percent of the total amount remitted.

The most important area where women were yet to make any major headway is the ownership of asset formed through remittance. It is interesting to note that in the majority of cases, the land was recorded in the names of male members of the families, such husband, father, brother etc. Male members of the families in these cases argued that on occasions female members were sent abroad by selling family property and therefore it was natural that when land was purchased the female migrant were not given the title. On some occasions, while purchasing land a portion of the price was paid from sources other than remittance. In these cases as well, the families did not feel obliged to register the land in the name of female migrants. Only in 16 percent cases, land



was registered in the names of female migrants. Compared to domestic aides, factory and garment workers, nurses had a much better record in this respect. Besides, when women have migrated for second or third time, they had better control over their remittance.

Upon return The returnee female migrants felt that migration had exposed them to a new world of which they had hardly any information available. It exposed majority of them to an environment that was devoid of all forms of traditional protection and support systems. The challenge of coping with such an environment necessitated development of independent individual abilities, which at the end made them better skilled and stronger. To elaborate the issue, none of the migrant women knew the language of the host countries, neither had they the command over English language. Therefore, when they migrated abroad they hardly possessed any communication skills. The garments workers and nurses had previous work experience and skill to perform the job for which they were recruited. However, those went as domestic workers were not familiar with the household electronic gadgets and appliances used by their employers. Most of those who went to work on different manufacturing plants in Malaysia did not have any clue about what they were expected to do. All these situations reflect the vulnerabilities of the migrant women. However, for the majority of the migrant women these were major challenges in life. All of them had to learn the basics of the language of the host country. Domestic workers had to learn how to operate home appliances and the factory workers had to adjust with new work conditions, learning new trades. These migrant women saw facing such challenges as a transitional process. Successful completion of this process at the end enhanced their self-confidence. To them, such experience had been tremendously empowering and was reflected in some ways or other in their family life once they returned home.

A majority of the migrant women, irrespective of their occupational category, also stated that migration increased their capacity to take decisions. During the migration period women were devoid of all forms of protection and support systems. At the same time they were free from all forms of control in taking decision on their personal affairs. In this context, women had to decide on their own. This has resulted in their capacity building for independent decision making. These acquired abilities helped them to negotiate their position in the family decision making process once they returned.

Deciding priority areas in family expenditure, upbringing of children and marriages in family are some of the areas where migrant women thought that they had much greater say at present than before. The largest number of migrant women identified children's education as one of the major areas where their wishes received more importance than before. During migration period through their flow of remittance they succeeded in making family members who stayed behind to provide better educational opportunities for their children. Remittances were spent in buying books and stationery, some were even to engage private tutors. Upon return, some of them could keep the pressure on their families for ensuring continued family expenditure on children's education.

One of the major functions that families perform in South Asian context is arranging marriage of sons and daughters. Decision in this regard is generally the preserve of elder and male members of households. Women usually try to influence these decisions from behind. Migrant women stated that after they migrated abroad and started sending money, their families started giving value to their judgement on issues such as marriage in the family. These returnee migrants were consulted while marriage of young members of households were being considered. Female migrants stated that they had a major say in decisions of marriage of their dependent family members. Giving importance to returnee women's opinion while arranging family marriages is an example of increased status of women in family power relationship.

Women also became more decisive with respect to issues regarding their personal life. This was reflected in their marital status. After or during migration few women put an end to bad marriages and a few others developed new relationships. Women in some occasions went abroad in the first place, to escape from bad marital relationships or out of frustration regarding lazy and useless husbands. Few of their husbands had other wives. It may very well be that these marriages have lasted for so long, due to economic dependence on husbands. Three female migrants, one while staying abroad and the other two after returning, had divorced their husbands. On four occasions,

women migrants got married. Except for one, the rest were cases of second marriage. This time, they chose their own partners. In one case, a female migrant met her partner while working abroad and the wedding took place in the host country. In another case, the employer of a female migrant sent her home to get married and bring her husband, so that the husband could also serve the employer as a guard. These incidents show that women were situated in a better position to decide the future course of their lives than before. Migration also increased vulnerability of female migrants with respect to marriage. Five migrant women were divorced or deserted by their husbands while they were abroad. In two cases, the husband did not want to live a lonely life and got married for the second time. In the other three cases, husband usurped the money sent by their wives and left them for other women.

From the discussion above it is evident that successful migration experience did increase women migrants' status within family. This is manifested in the increase in the incidence of joint decision making. Most women expressed their satisfaction with their newly acquired power and role in decision making. However, women, except from nurse category, have not been successful in ensuring the ownership of land purchased with their income due to different factors. Women's control over the use of their remittances increased during successive migration. A few unsuccessful migration experiences have increased the vulnerability of women within family. Society and family at large were found to be reinforcing values that instill in these migrant women a feeling of failure and guilt.

### ***Household Division of Labour***

During Migration: Various studies have shown that as a general principle, when men migrate in search of temporary work elsewhere, women's workload and responsibilities increase immensely (Bettistella 1997; S T Hettige, 1997). In the absence of the male partner the female partner takes over a double role, both of mother and that of father. This, on many occasions, has resulted in breaking the traditional division of labour based on gender. Does such alteration of gender role take place when women migrate? In other words, do men take up the roles that are generally performed by women? Let us now see how the principal male member of the household managed the household in the absence of the migrant woman, the principal female member. Does the male member shoulder some of the responsibilities previously borne by woman, e.g., looking after the children, organising the meals, cleaning, washing, ensuring children's attendance of school? In other words, does female migration have the potential to alter gender division of labour within the household?

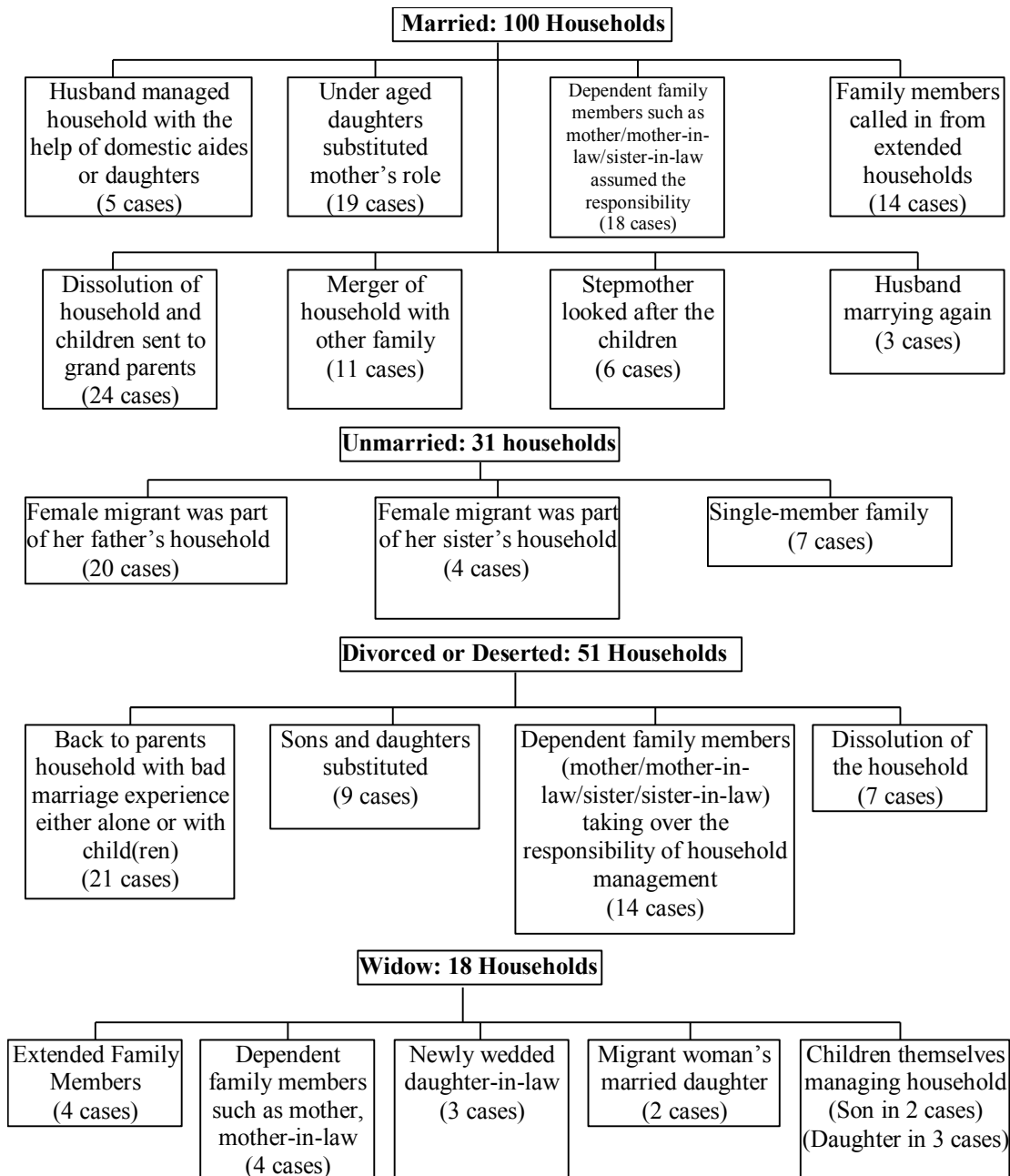
The field findings show that very rarely do male parents take over the responsibility of the female partners. The mother's role was substituted through various methods. At the household management level, the major responsibilities of the principal female members such as cooking, cleaning, washing, looking after the children were always labelled as female job. This was not even in the perception of the male spouse of migrant woman worker that he could be a substitute of his wife in undertaking those chores.

The experience of 200 migrant families shows that in most of the areas, the gender division of labour within the household did not change. Some of the male members however stated that they did play a major role in the area of their children's education. In the absence of their wives they felt a special responsibility to make sure that their children were studying properly and attending school regularly. A section of married men believed that they were sacrificing a great deal by not availing the services that are usually rendered to them by their wives and also by being deprived of their physical needs. They, of course, thought these sacrifices would lead to the greater economic welfare of the family. The following chart shows various scenarios of management of households. Along with 100 married households, the chart also presents the scenario of divorced/deserted and widowed households as well. One finds a distinct difference in role substitution among groups belonging to different marital status.

Chart 1 shows how male members of households have managed their families without shouldering some of the responsibilities of their female counterpart.



**Chart 1**  
**Role Substitution in the Absence of Women Migrant Workers**



One can see from the chart that, of the married families only in five cases did the principal male household members get involved in management of the household in a major way. They stated that they took part in performing day-to-day tasks that were earlier performed by their wives. However, in the overwhelming majority of cases it was the mother and mother-in-law who looked after families. Sometime these women were already part of the family; in other instances, they were brought in from their own homes for temporary management of the households. Dissolution of the household was another management technique for migrant families. In these cases mostly the children were sent to grandparents. But on occasions, husbands also accompanied the children to live with in-laws. Otherwise, principal male members moved into a shared accommodation. The chart also shows that on some occasions female migrants arranged a merger of household with their sisters, sisters-in-law or other relatives. The husbands of a few women migrants had a number of wives. In these cases, the household and the children were looked after by those women. On five occasions male heads of the households married again.

In case of divorced and deserted families, there was not much scope for male participation. In most cases, these women were living with their parents or brothers. Unmarried girls who migrated were also part of their parents' families. So, their departure from the family did not create much scope for role change. However, in a few cases, unmarried migrant women were living in urban areas with their friends or relatives. In case of widowed families, the chart shows in five cases children were living on their own. In two cases the eldest sons managed the family. They were performing tasks and taking decisions on issues which otherwise were mainly taken by the women members of the household. In their cases the double role was clearly visible.

Those who stayed for more than five years: Bringing about a change in the division of labour is a long-drawn process. One cannot expect that such changes will occur in a family within one or two years. Therefore in order to understand if the prolonged stay of their spouses overseas makes men more active within the family, the cases of migrant women who stayed overseas for more than five years were taken up for detailed study. Table 10 shows the number of those who stayed for more than five years according to their marital status. Out of 200, 42 female migrants either were staying or had stayed abroad for more than five years. Fourteen of these women were married. In their cases, the female migrants' mothers, mother-in-law, grandmother, daughters or domestic aides looked after the families. The highest number, 16, who stayed for more than five years belonged to the divorced or deserted categories. One of them did not have any immediate family, two did not have any children and in rest of the cases their mothers, brothers or sisters looked after their children. Therefore, one can see that there is hardly any difference in the management of households between those migrants who stayed for a relatively longer period of time with those who stayed for shorter periods.

The table makes another important point that a lesser number of women from the married category could stay abroad for longer periods. The highest percentage that could stay for longer periods belonged to the widowed category, followed by the deserted and the divorced. This leads towards the argument that the role that a married woman needs to perform in the family does not allow her to stay abroad for a long period. Her responsibility towards her family brings her back. Married women constituted the highest proportion of those who came back before finishing the first contract.

Findings on the impact of migration on male members of these households reveal that in both urban and rural areas, men are relatively inflexible in accepting new roles in household management in the absence of their spouses. Even the prolonged absence of women could not increase the pressure for alteration of male role within the family. In the case of married families, in the absence of wives, the task of home management was handed over to mother, mother-in-law, sister, sister-in-law, daughter or housemaids. In cases where female migrants were divorced, deserted or widowed, various support measures were invoked along with reliance on extended families. When the principal male member of a household migrates, the principal woman member takes over most of the male roles. Hence the involvement of the extended family is relatively low. However, when the principal female member migrates, her male counterpart takes on very little added responsibility. This results in higher involvement of the members of the extended household in managing the affairs of the family concerned.

## **Conclusion**

This paper made an attempt to understand the impact of female migration in respect to gender relations within the household. An analysis of 200 women migrant caseload reveals some very interesting linkages between economic empowerment and gender relations. It was however, not that simple a case that positive changes in gender relations will follow if economic empowerment took place. Likewise, positive changes in gender relationship may take place even though migration experience was not economically successful.

For majority of the women, migration efforts were economically gainful. For some it brought mixed results, and only in a few cases families experienced negative results. It was found that women's economic dependence on men decreased substantially during migration period. It turned a majority of them into principal earners of the family. It also created space for making women

visible as providers. Nonetheless, majority migrant households, particularly those in the married category did not want to recognise women in the provider's role, rather rationalised the situation as a temporary arrangement. Society at large reinforced traditional provider's role of men by treating women's migration as an outcome of special circumstance.

Positive economic gains did not make women's personal resource base stronger when women migrated for the first time. Absence from home country where assets were formed, lack of awareness about the need for independent asset and resource base, and their perception of themselves being a part of wider family units are major reasons for this. During their subsequent migration, however, women do develop mechanisms for commanding ownership of resources gained through migration.

Migration has contributed in increasing the respect for women within their families. Most families appreciated women's economic contribution to the family.

Women also acquired new role in family decision making. Increased participation of women in decision making was reflected in decisions regarding household expenditure, children's education and marriages within the family. However, it was not only their economic contribution but development of their negotiating skills that had resulted in such recognition. Although major advances were made by female migrants with regard to family decision making, migration experience of women failed to bring in any substantial change with respect to pre-existing gender division of labour within the households. This is because in the South Asian context, in the absence of the principal women of household, her role could be substituted by extended families. This may lead one to argue that female migration enhances the extended family bonds. However, it diffuses the pressure on role diversification of principal male members of the family.

We can thus conclude that migration has had a positive effect on establishing more equitable gender relationships. The dominant social and cultural ideologies that operate at various levels try their best to thwart the positive impacts of migration on gender relationships. In that respect, it is very important to identify the choices and options that female may have, which can give permanence to economic and social gains derived from migration.

## Annex

**Table 1 Migration by Country of Employment (1976- March 2000)**

Country	K.S.A	Kuwait	U.A.E	Qatar	Iraq	Libya	Bahrain	Oman	Malaysia	Korea	S.Pore	Others	Total	Remittance	
Year														Million Us	(Crore Tk.)
1976	217	643	1989	1221	587	173	335	113				809	6087	23.71	35.85
1977	1379	1315	5819	2262	1238	718	870	1492				632	15725	82.79	125.16
1978	3212	2243	7512	1303	1454	2394	762	2877	23			1029	22809	106.9	165.59
1997	6476	2298	5069	1383	2363	1969	827	3777			110	223	24495	172.06	266.95
1980	8695	3687	4847	1455	1927	2976	1351	4745	3		385	2	30073	301.33	492.95
1981	13384	5464	6418	2268	13153	4162	1392	7352			1083	1111	55787	304.88	620.74
1982	16294	7244	6863	6252	12898	2071	2037	8248			331	524	62762	490.77	1176.84
1983	12928	10283	6615	7556	4932	2209	2473	11110	23		178	913	59220	627.51	1568.76
1984	20399	5627	5185	2726	4701	3386	2300	10448			718	1224	56714	500	1265.49
1985	37133	7384	8336	4751	5051	1514	2965	9218			792	550	77694	500	1419.61
1986	27235	10286	8790	4847	4728	3111	2597	6255	53		25	254	68658	576.2	1752.85
1987	39292	9559	9953	5889	3847	2271	2055	440				711	74017	747.6	2313.94
1988	27622	6524	13437	7390	4191	2759	3268	2219	2			709	68121	763.9	2423.59
1989	39949	12404	15184	8462	2573	1609	4830	15429	401		229	654	101724	757.85	2446

1990	57486	5957	8507	7672	2700	471	4565	15980	1585		776	517	105814	781.54	2091.65
1991	75656	28574	8583	3772		1124	3480	23087	1628		62	585	147131	769.3	2818.65
1992	93132	34377	12975	3251		1617	5804	25825	10537		313	293	188124	901.97	3513.26
1993	106387	26407	15810	2441		1800	5396	15866	67938		1739	724	244508	1009.09	3986.97
1994	91385	14912	15051	624		1864	4233	6470	47826	1558	391	2012	186326	1153.54	4629.63
1995	84009	17492	14686	71		1106	3004	20949	35174	3315	3762	3975	187543	1201.52	4838.31
1996	72734	21042	23812	112		1966	3759	8691	66631	2759	5304	4904	211714	1355.34	5685.3
1997	106534	21126	54719	1873		1934	5010	5985	152844	889	27401	2762	381077	1525.03	6709.15
1998	158715	25444	38796	6806		1254	7014	4779	551	578	21728	2602	267667	1599.24	7513.18
1999	26286	3324	3912	864		239	666	713		136	1000	563	268182	1806.63	8882.74
2000 ((Jan-March)	32701	278	7014	715		484	815	1220	30	264	2584	166	46271	478.50	2440.34
Total	1318693	302970	338114	90713	66343	46686	75779	214620	385526	10864	78087	13139	2956243	18537.19	69783.48

Source: Prepared from BMET and Bangladesh Bank data 2000

**Table 2 Number and Percentage of Women Migration in Comparison to Total Flow (1991-99)**

Year	Women Migrants		Total Number Male and Female
	Number	% of Total	
1991-1995	9308	0.98	953632
1996	1567	0.74	211714
1997	1389	0.36	381077
1998	960	0.36	267667
1999	320	0.12	268182
Total	13544	0.65	2082272

Source: Prepared from manually consolidated figures provided by BMET.

**Table 3 Age Distribution of the Female Migrant Workers by Area**

Age	Area				Table Total	
	Rural		Urban			
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Up to 17	17	13.2	8	11.4	25	12.6
18-20	17	13.2	7	10.0	24	12.1
21-25	41	31.8	17	24.3	58	29.1
26-30	23	17.8	24	34.3	47	23.6
31-35	17	13.2	10	14.3	27	13.6
36-40	10	7.8	4	5.7	14	7.0
41-45	3	2.3			3	1.5

46 and above	1	.8	1	.5
Total	130	100.0	70	100.0

**Table 4 Marital Status of Female Migrants by Area**

Area	Married No	%	Unmarried No	%	Divorced/ Deserted No	%	Widow No	%	Total No	%
Rural	57	43.8	26	20.0	35	26.9	12	9.2	130	100.0
Urban	43	61.4	5	7.1	16	22.9	6	8.6	70	100.0
Total	100	50.0	31	15.5	51	25.5	18	9.0	200	100.0

**Table 5 Family Size of Female Migrants by Area**

Area	Number	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean
Rural	130	1.00	15.00	704.00	5.4154
Urban	70	1.00	14.00	352.00	5.0286
Total	200	1.00	15.00	1056.00	5.2800

**Table 6 Destination of 200 Female Migrants by Type of Work**

Type of Labour	Destination								Total No %
	UAE No %	Bahrain No %	Kuwait No %	Saudi Arabia No %	Malaysia No %	Maldives No %	Oman No %		
Nurse			2 20.0	1 10.0	7 70.0			10 100.0	
Garments Worker	18 6.3	1 3.1	1 3.1		5 15.6	6 18.8	1 3.1	32 100.0	
Factory Worker	1 3.0		1 3.0		31 93.9			33 100.0	
Domestic Aide	33 29.5	16 14.3	63 56.3					112 100.0	
Others			12 92.3		1 7.7			13 100.0	
Total	52 26.0	17 8.5	79 39.5	1 .5	44 22.0	6 3.0	1 .5	200 100.0	

**Table 7 Education Level of the Female Migrant Workers by Type of Work and Area**

Area	Illiterate No	%	Up to Class V No	%	Up to Class X No	%	S.S.C No	%	H.S.C No	%	Above No	%	Total No	%
Rural	69	53.07	34	26.15	24	18.46	3	2.3					130	100
Urban	26	37.14	19	27.14	15	21.42	1	1.42	3	4.28	6	8.57	70	100
Table Total	95	47.5	53	26.5	39	19.5	4	2	3	1.5	6	3	200	

**Table 8 Total Cost of Migration by Source in Value Terms**

SOURCE	AMOUNT	% OF TOTAL COST
Loan	4631900	53.35
Land Sale	938200	10.81
Mortgage	97000	1.12
Others	790700	9.11
Own Source	2224795	25.61



Total	8682595	100
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**Table 9 Use of Remittance in Different Sectors in Value Terms**

Sectors	Amount (in Taka)	% of Total
Consumption / Health Care / Education	1,64,04,192	55.65
Loan Repayment	54,65,027	18.54
Savings	20,37,036	6.91
Financing Migration of other Family Members	11,85,300	4.02
Land Purchase	9,85,712	3.34
Home Construction & Repair	5,35,796	1.82
Business Investment	6,13,824	2.08
Social Ceremony and Dowry	13,62,500	4.62
Involuntary Contribution to Relative	4,57,631	1.55
Others*	4,28,500	1.45
Total	2,94,75,518	100%

\*Others include misappropriation, purchase of luxury goods, releasing mortgaged land and taking mortgage etc.

**Table 10 No. of Female Migrants Staying Overseas for More than 5 Year by Marital Status**

Marital Status	Stayed for more than 5 Years		Total Number of families
	No.	% of total	
Married	14	14	100
Unmarried	6	19.35	31
Divorced /Deserted	16	31.37	51
Widowed	6	33.33	18
Total	42	21	200

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> This issue has been discussed in detail in Bhattacharya, 1994.

<sup>ii</sup> Article 6 of ILO Convention 97, paragraph 15 (3) of Recommendation No. 86.

<sup>iii</sup> IOM/INSTRAW jointly commissioned the study in 1999. It was conducted by this author on behalf of Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) of Dhaka University.

<sup>iv</sup> In November 1997 this ban was imposed following an inter-ministerial meeting of representatives of Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Finance, Labour and Cabinet Division.

<sup>v</sup> Vide Circular No. Br.-13/Com-1/92(part-1)657, dated 7.10.98.

<sup>vi</sup> BMET Notification of 1998.

<sup>vii</sup> Personal interviews with representatives of travel agencies involved in the trade. For reasons obvious they preferred to remain anonymous.

<sup>viii</sup> Dowry is an exploitative social institution. State and civil society organisations have undertaken different legal and social measures against the practice of dowry. Nonetheless, such measures are yet make any major headway. In such situations, the ability to pay for higher amount of dowry is likely to get these women a better option in marriage.