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### Breadwinners and Homemakers: Migration and Changing Conjugal Expectations in Rural Bangladesh

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# Breadwinners and Homemakers: Migration and Changing Conjugal Expectations in Rural Bangladesh

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**ABSTRACT** *The literature on marriage norms and aspirations across societies largely sees the institution as static – a tool for the assertion of masculinities and subordination of women. The changing meanings of marriage and conjugality in the contemporary context of globalisation have received scant attention. Based on research in rural Bangladesh, this article questions the usefulness of notions of autonomy and dependence in understanding conjugal relations and expectations in a context of widespread migration for extended periods, especially to overseas destinations, where mutuality is crucial for social reproduction, though in clearly gender-demarcated domains.*

## I. Introduction

Anthropological and feminist literatures discuss marriage as a form of social, economic and emotional security for women or as a site for subordination and invisibilisation of their work (Harris, 1981; Jackson, 2007; Kabeer, 2007; Palriwala and Uberoi, 2008). Despite these contradictory stances, for most South Asians marriage is an inevitable and essential stage in their lifecycle, an institution influencing their material conditions and social position. Often the institution is presented as static without distinguishing between categories of people and the different weightage they attribute to emotional and material needs within marriage. Poor women striving for economic mobility, value mutuality and respect in their personal lives more than material provision (Rao, 2008). The role of marriage in stabilising men's lives, and the opportunity this provides women to exercise agency, and the changing meanings of marriage and conjugality in the context of globalisation remain largely unresearched. With high male and female independent migration, especially to overseas destinations, co-residence can no longer be taken for granted. Spouses often live apart for 8–10 years during the initial phase of their marriage. This has implications for conjugal expectations from the spouse, family and oneself.

This article highlights the two-way relationship between marriage and labour migration. Marriage can be a strategy to facilitate and support migration; migration itself becomes a strategy to negotiate a desired marriage. The connections reveal the interlocking dynamics between labour flexibility in global markets and status strategies at home. These are highly

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gendered and specific to particular socio-cultural, religious and class contexts. Here I focus on conjugal expectations amongst poor Muslim couples in rural Bangladesh.

Policy-makers and academics consider women's autonomy in marriage essential for meeting fertility, child health and wellbeing related development goals (Caldwell, 1979). These linkages are, however, not straightforward. Autonomy and dependence within conjugal relations involve a balance between individual needs and the commitment to ideologies of togetherness and the family. The new experiences and challenges migration brings give autonomy and dependence new interpretations and meanings in practice, with spatial dislocations providing both men and women opportunities to enact different heterosexual identities (Walsh et al., 2008: 578). In Bangladesh, to compensate for long periods of physical absence, men use mobile phones and other forms of communication to maintain connectedness and a sense of participation in major decision-making in the household. Confronted often by harsh work situations at their destination, they rely on their home, and women's loyalty and caring labour, for stability in their lives and a buffer against the vagaries of the market (Sangari, 2002; Chopra et al., 2004). Their sense of affection, emotional bonding and togetherness is reflected in the containment and protection of their women (Trawick, 1992: 111) and reinforces gendered and spatially distinct divisions of labour.

Marriage in Bangladesh is considered an economic and social contract between households, yet it has deeper meanings linked to personhood and individual aspirations. This raises diverse and often contradictory demands on both partners. Poor women are increasingly entering the workforce, but as status-bearers for their household there are pressures towards greater seclusion. The ideals of companionship and romantic love promoted by the popular media are compromised by the need to fulfil social responsibilities (Gardner, 1995: 162–163). These are not necessarily oppositional. Romantic love is expected to grow within a marriage, not talked about explicitly, but expressed in everyday acts like women cooking and maintaining a clean house or material provision and sacrifice by men (Trawick, 1992).

This article is based on research in Achingaon, a relatively poor village<sup>1</sup> with 310 households, in Bangladesh's Manikganj district. Following a preliminary village census between July and December 2006 to collect basic household data, 16 men and women, differentiated by age, migration status and educational level, were interviewed in-depth between March and May 2007. Shorter interviews were conducted with their spouses and other family members. The interviews were transcribed and translated from Bengali into English and the survey data entered in SPSS. Following a preliminary analysis of this data, a second round of field work was conducted between April and June 2008.<sup>2</sup> This involved follow-up interviews to deepen insights from the data collected in the first phase; focus group discussions with young men and women to understand their aspirations and the traits they considered desirable in a spouse; key informant interviews with garment worker union representatives; migrant and employer associations and government bodies like the Bureau of Manpower Training and Employment (BMET) to better understand the local context of work and migration. This article seeks to explain the disjunctures and shifts in norms and meanings of conjugality among working-class men and women in a particular context in rural Bangladesh, one that has witnessed high levels of out-migration in the past two decades and does not claim to generalise these insights for the whole of Bangladesh.

## **II. Autonomy and Dependence in Conjugal Relations**

Jejeebhoy (1995) identified five interdependent constituents of autonomy: knowledge, decision-making, physical movement, emotions and economic and social position. The last, represented through employment and its links to control over resources and incomes, alongside education, is considered the most crucial variable for strengthening relative bargaining power within marriage (Sen, 1990). In Bangladesh, male work or employment is recognised as essential to masculinity and male roles as family breadwinners. Women's work participation, except white-collar

employment, has always had contradictory meanings (Kabeer, 2000). Not included in local notions of femininity (which emphasise domesticity), women's work outside the home is construed as a threat to male honour, causing loss of status to the household. It is a major source of conflict in the negotiation of marital relations (Standing, 1991; White, 1992). Despite the rapid expansion of the readymade garment industry driven largely by female labour in the last two decades, such employment is normatively seen as unsuitable for respectable women. Women workers are not considered worthy wives (Kibria, 1998; Mahmud, 2001). Their work is accepted due to poverty and everyday survival needs, as a temporary phenomenon preceding marriage.

Women's withdrawal from the workforce and focus on the home contributes to male status. This is not a unilateral male imposition in Achingaon, or a consequence of seclusion ideologies propagated by religious parties such as the Jamaat-e-Islami, which was part of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led coalition government between 2001 and 2005.<sup>3</sup> Many poor women persist with wage work after marriage, but due to the nature and quality of available work and the local stigmatisation, they see marriage and motherhood as the more reliable route to material security and their emotional need to belong. Rather than being victims of social norms or moral principles, this withdrawal reflects working-class women's manipulation of norms of male provision, central to Muslim marriage, to promote their own interests within matrimony (Hoodfar, 1997).

Despite public disapproval of women's employment, female education is encouraged. State policies, including stipends for the secondary level, have made education more accessible to girls. Non-governmental adult education and skill training programmes for women's groups have also played a part. More than contributing to economic autonomy, educational skills are increasingly valued in the marriage market, as enabling young women to better manage domestic affairs in the absence of their husbands, in addition to assuming responsibility for household chores and caring for both parents and children (c.f. Fan and Li, 2002). Female literacy is rising but most girls drop out before completing secondary education since it would entail marrying a better educated husband with a higher dowry demand which only a few can afford.<sup>4</sup>

Togetherness, more than autonomy or independence, is central to conjugal relations. Men and women exercise agency in shaping mutual relationships involving personal feelings and emotions. This needs recognition instead of just viewing marital relationships in terms of domination and subordination. Fiske (1992) identified four sets of rules and norms representing distinct forms of sociality: communal sharing (group more important than the individual), market pricing (high level of individual independence with negotiation and bargaining central to all exchanges), equality matching (equality of opportunities to concerned individuals leading to balance and reciprocity in exchange), and authority ranking (hierarchical power relationships in terms of gender, age, money, based on consent). Human relationships show these traits in different phases of an interaction or at different hierarchically nested levels, their expression varying with the gendered position. In contexts of widespread migration, conjugal expectations get sharply delineated, in terms of economic activity and emotional labour, with less scope for overlap due to the physical separation.

Women adopting communal sharing modes choose home-making in fulfilling expectations. Men slip more easily into relations of authority with its moral responsibility of supporting their dependents. Developing strong personal bonds becomes women's strategy for securing positions in the marital home. Men strive for material markers of prestige to bolster and ideologically validate these relationships. This process of separation and spatial demarcation of activities is not solely male driven; poor women too participate in redefining conjugal expectations and practices over the life course, producing new forms of domestic life in response to changing contexts (Palriwala and Uberoi, 2008: 43). Instead of linking autonomy to wages and the control over assets, it is crucial to research more subtle and less tangible pathways of influence and assertion, recognising that mutuality combines pragmatic survival concerns with love and companionship.

The analysis of individual agency in negotiating conjugality in this article is conducted at two distinct though inter-related levels: the everyday needs of social reproduction of the household which includes earning money for family maintenance, bringing up and educating children and building assets for the future; and the discursive level of the movement of ideas and norms across time and space (Levitt, 1996). In particular, the local premium on overseas migration has reinforced marriage payments in the form of dowries, and attempts to impose conservative gendered norms, behaviours and practices, like restrictions on women's mobility and their confinement to the home.

III. Marriage and Migration in a Bangladesh Village

Most Achingaon residents say they are *chashis* (cultivators), though only one-third survive on farming. Agriculture does not fulfil subsistence and status needs due to the small holdings, high input costs and declining yield prices. Easy connectivity to the capital Dhaka, 50 miles away, and the Export-Processing Zones (EPZ) on its outskirts has substantially shifted employment patterns. There is a growing outflow of youth seeking employment in the urban factories and workshops. Nineteen young women work in the garment factories, nine of them commuting from the village everyday, the others live in hostels and shared accommodation close to the factories. Hailing from very poor families, they left school to support themselves and their parents.<sup>5</sup> For men, a few years in Dhaka is a stepping stone to emigration to the Middle East. Of the total 132 men currently migrant, 27 per cent are overseas, a majority under 35 years (Table 1). Thirty-seven per cent are unmarried. Successful overseas migration provides them the resources to improve their quality of life in a short time, marry and establish a family, while for the others it is driven by the need to support their families. Of the remaining migrants, 58 work in welding workshops and garment factories, 32 in religious professions, either in *madrassas* (Quranic schools) or mosques, and the remaining 12 in a range of jobs (Rao, 2009).

This pattern follows national employment and growth trends. Remittances from overseas migrants and earnings from the export-oriented garments industry comprise 20 per cent of Bangladesh's gross domestic product (GDP), with the former fast outdoing the latter (Rahman et al., 2009). The garment industry employs 3.1 million workers, 77 per cent of them women.<sup>6</sup> Between 1976 and 2009, 6.7 million Bangladeshis, mostly male,<sup>7</sup> half of them unskilled, worked overseas on short-term contracts (Siddiqui, 2005). Since the 1970s rising oil prices and the infrastructure boom in the Middle Eastern countries has led to the region drawing 85 per cent of Bangladeshi overseas migrants (BMET, 2010).

The growing importance of overseas migration led the Government of Bangladesh to set up a Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment in 2001 to protect and support migrant workers (<http://www.bmet.org.bd>). But in the garment sector, it negotiates with employer associations' ways of curbing labour costs to make the industry globally competitive. This gendered demarcation of the two main growth sectors has implications for the reshaping of

Table 1. Location of livelihood activity by sex for population over the age of 18 years

Location of activity	Male		Female	
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
In the village	241	62	306	92.25
Within the country	102	26	19	6
Overseas	30	8	2	0.25
Other	15	4	5	1.5
Total	388	100	332	100

Source: Village survey (2006).

gender relations and conjugality more broadly, by pointing to the dynamics of institutions, particularly state policy and collective practices, mediating the modalities of women's participation in public life (Carrigan et al., 2002).

The first man migrated abroad from Achingaon in 1993. Emigrating overseas is, however, expensive for the poor. Internal migration can largely be financed through family savings. Going abroad requires the disposal of assets like land or livestock (26% of the cases) or borrowing from moneylenders at interest as high as 10 per cent monthly (54% of the cases). This investment is made with the expectation of generating substantially higher earnings. For men from poor households (80% of them landless), cheated, overworked, underpaid and harassed at the workplace, success is uncertain. Only 56 per cent of overseas migrants from the village generated surpluses. The rest just broke even or incurred losses due to imprisonment or deportation (Rao, 2009).

'Karim now gets a good salary of 35,000 taka monthly.<sup>8</sup> When he first went to Saudi Arabia, he was cheated and not paid for five months. He works very hard, from 8 am till 10 pm daily', said Barid, 23, Karim's brother.

'My husband faced many problems in Saudi Arabia. He worked in a shop and was doing well, but was arrested and deported for gambling. We are still repaying the loan for his trip', said Shamim, 23.

In the first case, the man's sacrifice and hard work evokes sympathy and support from his spouse and family. In the second, there is sorrow and resentment at his being deported, an experience that has enhanced the material responsibilities of the other household members, including his wife. Migration types and experiences do influence the terms of conjugality expressed through roles and responsibilities but are equally reflected in the nature of material and emotional exchanges.

In securing a desirable groom with social and economic prospects to secure their daughter's future well-being parents invest heavily in her marriage. There is a re-emphasis on dowries in marriage negotiations. Dowry has to be contextualised in the historical shifts in the region's political economy and resultant changes in social relations (Lindenbaum, 1981). Declining land productivity in Bangladesh through the 1970s and rising urban unemployment favours a salaried job-holder instead of a landowner in the choice of a groom. This has strengthened in the last two decades. The prestige system has shifted from being land based to one centred on the accumulation of money. With overseas migration now the preferred option for accumulating money in a relatively short period, despite the recognition of emotional separation during the initial years of marriage, parents seek overseas migrants as potential grooms for their daughters and willingly finance their migration. Dowry takes new forms, like provision of visa papers, travel documents and imported consumer goods that help build a new social identity, rather than clothes, sweets and local goods, or capital to finance a small enterprise. Rather than signifying increasing subordination, the dowries indicate the use of marriage for upward social mobility, and as a marker of status and reputation (White, 1992: 25). This search for prestige through marital alliances and consumption has implications for women's behaviour, including being subjected to personal and spatial controls (Gardner, 1995: 184). I analyse next the implications of male migration on conjugal relations, focusing on women's work and behaviour.

#### **IV. Male Migration and the Reconfiguration of Conjugality**

Marriage is a transition to independent adulthood for both men and women. For men, while expanding access to an extended kinship network, it emphasises economic responsibility, and the need for labour market engagement to raise the capital and financial resources to start and maintain a family. The responsibility of household provision is now theirs.



Born in a poor family, Karim, 30, was under pressure to start earning after secondary school. He joined a welding shop in Dhaka, learnt the skill and then decided to migrate to Saudi Arabia, a move that several young men from Achingaon were attempting then. In 2004, after five years in Dhaka, he migrated, largely facilitated by his marriage. Three of his prospective brothers-in-law had lived in Saudi Arabia for several years, and one of the conditions of the marriage negotiations was that his in-laws would sponsor his migration. As part of the marriage transactions they provided him with the sponsorship papers, visa and cash for the purchase of his ticket (worth a total of 100,000 taka). He mortgaged half an acre of land to meet other expenses.

Karim had not visited home since he left, three years at the time of the interview, but had remitted 250,000 taka to his family.<sup>9</sup> This was used for repaying the loan, releasing the mortgaged land and purchasing another half acre of arable land (for 100,000 taka). Labour was employed for levelling land for the homestead and cultivation. The remaining money was used for the purchase of clothes for all the household members (10,000 taka), the treatment of his ailing mother (20,000 taka), small donations to the mosque and madrasa (1500 taka each). Finally substantial social prestige was accumulated by sacrificing a cow worth 10,000 taka at Eid. His father hoped to construct a large brick house, a status symbol, out of future remittances. He wanted his son to undertake the *hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca, another symbol of prestige. Of the total remittance, only 1000 taka was given to Karim's wife. Her life of isolation is the price of upward social mobility for the larger family, based on the accumulation of land, housing as well as substantial social capital. He occasionally telephones his family, but it is expensive. The calls are short, matter of fact and with barely any space for the expression of emotions.

Karim emigrated soon after his daughter's birth. He has not seen his wife or daughter, now three, since then. He is the household's major earner and this brings them prestige. In his absence, his parents, representing him in the conjugal duty of providing protection, rigidly control his wife's movements. As Trawick (1992: 96) found in South India, the spatial confinement of a wife is considered an expression of care and protection. But there is also apprehension that she may enter a relationship with someone else.<sup>10</sup>

Several elements of conjugality and conjugal expectations need exploration. Twenty-two-year-old Roopa, Karim's wife, barely knows her husband. Migrant men like Karim are seen as sacrificing homely comforts, living in hardship and loneliness to adequately provide for their families, and offer their wife and children, apart from parents and siblings, a better future (c.f. Watkins, 2003). This evokes a similar response of sacrifice from the women for the sake of their family's wellbeing. Roopa said, 'Everybody wants a better life. A migrant husband earns more. I can suffer his absence for a few years. It will give us a better life later'.

Economic success and provision are an important conjugal expectation from men, who in turn expect their wives to meticulously perform familial and mothering roles. All the regular overseas migrant men interviewed during their home visit preferred their wives had a child or got pregnant before they left again, each time they came back. Apart from the pressure to prove their masculinity by having the first child as soon as possible, the men justified that children provide physical companionship and emotional comfort to the mother. The bride's parents too approve of this strategy, as they feel that pregnancy and bearing a child protects their daughter from affairs and becoming the target of gossip.

After Karim emigrated, Roopa moved to her parental home briefly for the freedom and leisure she got there, but she wanted to live as a wife and mother, benefiting from the newly acquired status of a married woman, rather than remaining under the scrutiny of her parents. With sole responsibility for bringing up a little child, she gets no time for other activities and is bound closely to the household. Education seems to hardly play a role in negotiating autonomy in such instances. Roopa, like Roona, 22, married to Muzaffar (28), a welder and overseas migrant, and both tenth grade pass, has little control over her fertility. The possibility of pursuing a career does not arise. Motherhood becomes the centrepiece of women's identity, their education improving the quality of child-rearing and the management of a new, status-oriented lifestyle.

Their aspirations are directed towards their children and families instead of their own conjugal relationship, thus enhancing rather than threatening their husband's status.

Migrant men expect wives to be polite, obeying and caring for their parents. Describing preferred traits of potential wives in a focus group discussion, six young men, waiting to migrate overseas, made statements like:

1. My wife should be submissive and polite and respect her in-laws.
2. She should be educated, so she can take care of her in-laws and children.
3. She should be good looking and good natured.

This expectation of a kind and caring relationship is akin to communal sharing where the people identify themselves with their closest, most intimate and enduring relationships (Fiske, 1992). Their sense of belonging together leads to an ethic of care, commitment and sacrifice for the sake of their partners. Women's attentiveness to household work is interpreted in a framework of lasting personal relationships, immeasurable through time or money, but operating within and inseparable from relationships of love, nurture and sexuality (Sangari, 2002). Bonds and dependencies between extended kin are strengthened rather than broken.

Discursively, men foster aggressive cultural identities and reinforce traditional behaviour in order to face the insecurity and onslaught of global cultures and ideas in their lives. Rashid, 32, a construction worker detailed their daily lives in Saudi Arabia – the exploitation and harassment at the workplace, accompanied by employers' enforcing forms of morality like praying five times daily and respecting women by ensuring their total seclusion. These young men desire dependable and good looking wives who can be their confidantes. Their sense of togetherness is expressed through ritual performances, often propagating practices like veiling (see also Amin and Al-Bassusi, 2004). Muzaffar mentioned that like Saudi women, he would prefer his wife donned a *burqa* (a full veil) and stayed within the home. Several shops sell *burqas* now in the local markets.

The women remain non-committal about veiling, selectively accepting it when they go to the market or attend social functions. They use it to establish their moral and material superiority over others in the village, but not to restrict their everyday activities (Thangarajah, 2003). Economic mobility can bring status, stability and prosperity, alongside a desire for companionate marriages with a stress on intimacy. This process nevertheless has contradictory outcomes, often being accompanied by a growth of conservative practices that enhance gender inequality (Parry, 2001). Women then seek to develop new strategies for negotiation, both individually and collectively.

Rather than being 'cultural dopes', women find personal meaning in particular ways of relating and investing in these relationships (Kabeer, 2000: 33). Their agency is directed to supporting their husbands in accomplishing broader social goals, of expanding networks, prestige and symbolic capital within the community, rather than necessarily fulfilling their personal needs, as her identity is ultimately linked to his success (Rasheed, 2008). Yet, different from Grover's (2009) finding in Delhi, that in a context of economic instability and low incomes, women equated economic fulfilment with love, young women here were ambiguous about migrant husbands emotionally, reflecting the need to balance individual desires with social gains. Some narratives during the focus group discussion provide insight into these tensions:

1. If they live together, a wife can share her sorrow and happiness with her husband. But in his absence, young wives are often depressed.
2. If her husband is abroad, the wife is under the strict control of her in-laws and hardly has any freedom. She is often lonely.
3. Sometimes there is conflict between the wife and in-laws. If the husband sends the remittance to the wife, then the in-laws get upset and ill-treat her. She has no one to talk to.



Young women do desire love, companionship and intimacy in marriage, as evident from Nafisa's case discussed in the next section. However, especially amongst the poor, they often have to compromise such ideals in their family's quest for material security and social mobility. Since employment is integral to masculine identity, male migration is ultimately accepted as a necessity. The implications of female work migration for conjugal relations, given the general disapproval of women's work outside the home, are more complex. The next section examines how women's work shapes the nature and quality of conjugality, the economic, social and emotional dependence, and its relation to status and stability.

## **V. Women's Work and Conjugality**

Stages in the lifecycle affect women's lives in important ways, with implications for work, social relationships and status (Lamb, 2000). In this section, I illustrate migrant women's exercise of agency and the nature of conjugal relations at two stages in their life cycle, the first when she is unmarried/newly married and the second when she is well settled in her reproductive cycle.

Nafisa, 20, is the fourth of six siblings. Her eldest brother, a class V dropout, has been in Saudi Arabia for the past four years, her two elder sisters are married and her younger brother and sister study in the village. Nafisa left school in class eight due to a financial crisis at home, despite the fact that she loved her studies and proudly mentioned receiving a cash stipend from the school. She started working in the EPZ in June 2003 as a helper, on a monthly salary of 1700 taka. After two years she was promoted as an operator, with her salary now standing at 3400 taka per month. The salaries are paid regularly; they have access to toilets and a common canteen where they can buy food, but there are no other benefits. Her working hours are usually from 7 am to 6 pm.

Nafisa commutes from Achingaon to the EPZ. Her father receives her at the bus-stop in the evening and they walk home together. This reflects family support and concern for her safety and affection, but also the moral panic about the character of a working woman, and the consequent need for policing her movements. Her father is ailing. Her income is mostly spent on his treatment and meeting daily food needs. Sometimes she buys clothes for herself, but gives more importance to the emotional and social support of her family than controlling her income. They have built a semi-brick house with her brother's remittances.

In December 2007 Nafisa married Mahmud (25), a co-worker she loved for several years without her parents' knowledge. With increasing proposals for her marriage,<sup>11</sup> she confided about her relationship to her sister-in-law (brother's wife). Her parents were reluctant as they did not have social networks or knowledge of the family and community in Mahmud's home in Mymensing, geographically distant from Achingaon. This could potentially enhance the risk of abandonment, as 'love', they felt, was insufficient for the stability of the marriage. Compatibility and respect between the two families were essential too. They feared that without social linkages, the 'boys' could abandon their 'wives' if they found a better opportunity elsewhere (Schuler et al., 2006). Mahmud too had a hard time convincing his parents, but finally both families agreed.

Kin recognition and family support was important to the couple. They believed that their experience of love and being together could be threatened, contained or supported by networks of kin (Hart, 2007). The social legitimacy of such recognition was essential to the stability of their marriage, representing as it would both social consent and compatibility, while avoiding the charges of selfishness, lust and rejection of social obligations (Mody, 2002). For the families too, the presentation of a 'love marriage' as 'arranged' helped maintain honour, but also shows tolerance of the new values amongst the young in the face of the onslaught of conservative Islam (Marsden, 2007).

Mahmud too dropped out of education after his secondary school examination in 1998 due to familial poverty. Unsuccessful in getting a job in the military or police, he joined the EPZ as a Quality Inspector. His basic salary was 4500 taka, with overtime he got 6500 taka per month. He worked there for eight years, but resigned after his marriage. He intended to migrate to

Singapore for two years as a construction labourer on a monthly salary of 40,000 taka, and had already undertaken the official training for this purpose. Unfortunately this option did not work out, so he was trying to go to Libya. The cost of migration was lower than for Singapore, but so would be the monthly earnings.

After marriage, Nafisa continued to live with her parents to keep her job. She has to support herself, Mahmud and her parents. Mahmud's parents are unaware that she continues in her job as they disapprove of a working daughter-in-law. Marriage exerts pressure from the new family to relinquish paid work for the task of a full-time home-maker, not neglecting household responsibilities and the family's honour. Mahmud noted, 'boys marry and bring a wife mainly for doing household work. But working girls don't have time for the household. The earning does not matter, it is important to be caring of the in-laws'. They have not told his parents that he is unemployed as this would adversely affect his status and prestige in the community.

Nafisa and Mahmud feel they have got what they wanted in each other in terms of personal attributes and emotional understanding. She does not want him to migrate abroad, but work in Dhaka or close by so they can live together and build their lives. He, however, considers migration an issue of prestige, and the best way to earn sufficiently to set-up a business in the village. Nafisa is willing to share the burden, yet for Mahmud, migration is an investment in establishing a successful masculinity, essential for gaining status and respect (Gardner, 2009). Despite their different views, as the earning subject, Nafisa is able to discuss these issues with Mahmud. Her ability to negotiate her marriage, without dowry, itself points to her agency. Since elopement is negatively sanctioned by society, seeking family support was strategically important, as it would help shift existing social norms and set up new discourses of femininity encompassing wage-earning activities, alongside transforming norms of courtship and marital choice (Tiano and Ladino, 1999). In the end, however, she was prepared to trade her income, work and autonomy, perhaps her closeness to Mahmud, for domesticity and the status this could provide her, but equally to support the construction of Mahmud's identity as provider. She recognises the constraints women face in fulfilling individual aspirations, with gains often small and incremental.

This decision can be understood in the larger context of perceptions about women working in the garment factories. Economically, their low wages will never make them financially independent. From a status perspective, it is believed that most girls in the garment factories are '*dushito*' (spoilt); they are either divorced, have had a negative experience in their lives or are very poor (Paul-Majumder and Begum, 2006). Their moral character is suspect as they work alongside men. Migration and promiscuity are virtually equated, both threatening the cohesiveness of the marital home (Francis, 2002: 177). The focus group discussion with young men revealed that while recognising their economic contributions, garment workers were stigmatised for their autonomy and mobility. Some remarks illustrate this:

1. Women and men work together in garments, they come home late at night and this is not acceptable. People talk about their immorality.
2. Working women have a different temperament. They do not care for their husband. They can threaten to divorce their husband and live separately on trivial grounds as they are economically empowered. Therefore men don't like marrying them.

Apart from stressing female domesticity as a normative good, these statements reflect male economic and sexual insecurity. There is a constant apprehension that garment workers might abandon their husband for someone better placed and perhaps more attractive.<sup>12</sup> Their financial contribution to the family is downplayed; rather the economic independence is constructed as a threat to the marriage and a challenge to men's breadwinning abilities. Even though Mahmud had a higher paid job than Nafisa in the factory, after marriage he felt it important to exercise unilateral economic control in the relationship and did not want to remain in the same workplace. He courted Nafisa for five years, yet after marriage, there is a transformation.

Despite the reality of their everyday lives, now his views on her work and behaviour reflect dominant male discourses that stress female deference post-marriage. For women too, as employment remains insecure, low paid and involving long hours, social expectations revolve around reproductive success (Cain, 1988). Material conditions permitting, they forsake such employment for social reproduction and status production roles (Papanek, 1979). These roles demand more time, involving engagement with a range of activities geared to household consumption (sewing, vegetable production, food processing) as well as tasks like supervising the children's schoolwork, and beautification of the home. Marriage moves the relationship beyond love and desire to incorporate social status, social reproduction and social responsibility (del Rosario, 2008).

The situation is more complex for unmarried girls migrating abroad. Sabina, 20, went to Bahrain as a domestic worker because of her parents' poverty. The villagers disrespect her father because he sent her abroad. They cast aspersions on her character. Her father avoids meeting people as they look down on him, something that hurts him a lot. Sabina's migration has resulted in a trade-off between the family's socio-economic condition and honour. Sabina's parents want to get her married, but finding a suitable groom is proving difficult. One option is for Sabina to save enough money to arrange a visa for the prospective groom so he can go overseas and she stay in the village. But Sabina thinks of procuring a visa for the groom so both can be abroad together a few years before returning home to a better future. There are many young men who want to emigrate overseas, so this might well be the solution. As an earning subject, she is able to exercise personal choice in marriage, and also find a way of overcoming the hurdle of loss of reputation and character.

The prospects for changing gender relations vary with age and stage in the life cycle. Younger women such as Sabina or Nafisa can be accommodated more easily within familial power structures than older women whose families depend on their earnings. The former are considered temporary workers, saving money for their future,<sup>13</sup> but the latter face painful contradictions between their work and conjugal lives. Zahera, 35, has six children. They are landless. She and her husband engaged in wage labour, harvesting paddy, fishing, and levelling and bunding fields. He earned 60 taka and she 30 taka for a whole day's work, but this was insufficient for feeding a family of eight. This was in 2002, her youngest child, a son, barely a year old then.

We could not raise the resources for my husband. There was no choice; I had to emigrate for my family's sake. We didn't have enough to eat and the children couldn't attend school. The government has promoted bad policies. A woman needs 70,000 taka to go abroad, while a man needs 240,000 taka. Due to this difference, in poor households like ours there is no option but for the woman to migrate. To get my daughters married, I need at least 100,000 taka as dowry for each. I need to save 200,000 taka for my two older daughters and can think of the others later.

Zahera was employed as a domestic in Bahrain. Everyday she had to clean her employer's large house, wash and iron clothes and cook. Her day started at 5 am and she worked past midnight, without any off-days. Her monthly salary was 5500 taka (35 dinar). If she phoned home, they deducted 3 dinars, so she rarely called. She visited home for two months after being away for three years. On her return, her employers raised her wages to 40 dinars, but she fell ill six months later and had to be hospitalised. She did not recover fully to cope with the trying schedules and two months later decided to return home.

In her first stint, Zahera was mainly repaying the loan and interest. Only during the second migration could she save some money (six months' salary). She has not yet repaired the house, resumed her daughters' schooling, or saved money for her daughters' dowries. Her employers wanted her back and were willing to buy her ticket, so at the time of the interview, she had decided to return to Bahrain. Meanwhile, her two eldest daughters, aged 16 and 14, were working at a garments factory as helpers, earning 800 taka a month each.

In terms of material control, decision-making or mobility, Zahera is quite independent, with clear aspirations and strategies. She sees earning as a key element of her maternal responsibilities, but the most difficult adjustment for her has been the emotional one. She grieves about being separated from the family, and her inability to look after them in everyday terms. If marriage creates pressures on men to provide, it equally pressurises women to fulfil their domestic roles involving care and nurture. She said,

I feel bad about what my husband goes through in my absence. Returning home at the end of a day's hard labour he has to cook and only then eat. If I were around, I would have helped and we would have shared the tasks. I missed my family terribly and coped because I accepted this as Allah's will. I prayed constantly. Social traditions stipulate a woman care for her home and children. I didn't want to leave them. Women should stay at home, look after the family and take good care of their husband. It is not right for them to work outside.

There is a close interrelationship between material and emotional considerations and trade offs. Zahera, as an earning subject, had full autonomy, yet she missed her everyday family interactions and sharing of conjugal responsibilities. The domestic space can subordinate but it also places women in a central position with family members depending on them for support, and in this sense, they do feel valued. Secondly, though her husband contributes to housework and childcare especially in her absence, Zahera is conscious of her husband's role as provider and emphasises that he works hard to earn money and feed the family on a daily basis. Her discourse reflects the desire to quit the workforce and concentrate on her domestic responsibilities, blaming state policies for not ensuring a minimum living wage for labour in the local context.

## **VI. Dowries and the Reinforcement of Patriarchal Ideologies**

Men in poor households in rural Bangladesh, as mentioned earlier, lacking local employment opportunities and finances to emigrate abroad, often depend on dowries and marriage relationships for this purpose, both monetarily and in terms of social networks. The issue of dowry in South Asia has been intensely debated. It has been postulated as a pre-mortem inheritance for daughters (Tambiah, 1973), but also contributing to the devaluation and undesirability of daughters, and their continued categorisation as subordinates, jeopardising their very survival through female infanticide and sex-selective abortions (Oldenburg, 2002). Yet women and girls favour dowry, seeing it as essential for marrying a 'good' man, raising their value and status in the marital home and thus contributing to their conjugal happiness and security (Srinivasan and Bedi, 2006). Thus despite the illegality and denigration of dowries in the subcontinent, the practice is widespread across every social class, caste and religion (Banerjee, 2002).

Just as Karim's brothers-in-law financed his migration, there are several instances in Achingaon where most of the remittance is used for dowries. Abdul Alim, 24, is a bachelor, but half his remittance of 150,000 taka in the last two years has gone for his sister's dowry. This demonstration of social responsibility is an important constituent of masculinity. The ability of a brother to pay his sister's dowry enhances his status as a provider and improves his marriage prospects.

Dowry concerns female migrants too, exceptions being instances of 'love marriages' like Nafisa's. Her parents did not pay a dowry, but this makes her work surreptitiously to support her husband till funds are garnered for his migration. Poor women migrants often use all of their remittance for their daughter's marriage; Zahera intended to return to Bahrain, despite her qualms, to finance her daughters' dowries. Women migrants may experience degrees of autonomy but their remittances perpetuate if not exacerbate the dowry system (Gallo, 2008). Diverse and often difficult life and work experiences make them aspire to a life of stability, albeit secluded, for their daughters. Dowry and marriage expenditures enhance the family's status, display affection for the daughter, and become an important investment in marrying her into an upwardly mobile household.

## VII. Conclusion

Marriage has always been a defining moment in women's lives. But as discussed in this article, in the context of migration, marriage is equally important in the lives of men. Rapidly growing working-class male overseas migration in the last two decades has enhanced their engagement with the public sphere, made possible by delegating their home obligations to their wife. Expectations of people becoming more liberal in their beliefs after exposure to new countries, new media and technology are belied. On the contrary, conservatism in gender norms is growing. For men, control over women, their mobility and fertility, appears to compensate for the lack of control over their work and the production processes and the insecurities of their public, working life. Male status in these new terms is enhanced by the 'performance' of control and adoption of authoritative stances as evinced in the increasing confinement of women (Chopra et al., 2004).

Despite the growing spatial distinctions of roles and activities, driven by physical separation, with women increasingly falling into relational modes involving care, dependence and responsibility for household management, they are not just silent bystanders to enhanced male control. Their needs, expectations and strategies change sharply over their life course, based on their experiences of work, education and childhood in general, constantly shaping and constructing new meanings of domestic life in the process. Employment does lead to substantial control over incomes and decision-making but it is low-paid and insufficient for an independent life. It does not lead to emotional happiness when women's economic activity is devalued and considered a loss of status for both themselves and their husbands. In a situation where men can potentially earn much higher incomes and women are confined to low wage activities, women's discourses too reflect a desire to quit the workforce and focus on their domestic responsibilities, in support of their husband's enterprise.

For migrant women, the stage in the life course is critical for its status implications – a fundamental element of the institution of marriage. To ensure that the reputation of unmarried migrant women remains intact so they can be honourably married, strategies for policing and control have been developed, including staying together in groups, commuting from the village, and being accompanied by a father or a brother. Yet these young women exercise considerable agency in their personal lives, especially in the choice of a spouse, seeking more equal conjugal relations and to be treated as complete social citizens at home and in the workplace.

For married women the need to support and look after the family and children is more important now than bothering about personal reputations. Long-term security for them is bound with their families, and earning a wage does not necessarily guarantee the exercise of choices in relation to one's life. Such women want a household based on joint contributions and cooperation, but with the expansion of overseas work opportunities, this is no longer a given. For Zahera, there was no choice but to migrate, while Nafisa's husband is pushing for hegemonic male provision through his own migration, both made possible due to the strength of social bonds. The private realm of the home and strengthening of marriage as an institution is used as a fallback to resist the exploitation and control embedded in the global labour markets, pointing to the deep and complex interconnections between both analytical and spatial scales ranging from the individual and household to the state and global (Devasahayam et al., 2004: 136).

The desire for social status and respectability ultimately leads to increasing conformity with cultural ideals of male providers and dependent spouses. The social and institutional aspects of marriage, including dowries, have taken new forms that support and even intensify these distinct roles and identities. Girls' education has outpaced boys', but rather than translating into greater voice within marriage, the desire for social mobility and status gains has meant both an increase in dowries and the restriction of women's mobility and autonomous activity. But it also reveals the various levels at which choices are made, and the complexities of balancing individual emotions and social norms.

As I have argued in this article, marriage reflects a complex intermix of economic aspirations, status-enhancing strategies and emotions including those of love and care. These are not



water-tight categories, but interact in shaping conjugal relations and norms at specific historical moments among particular social groups. Marriage conveys messages about social contexts and the changing lives of people in the world around them, with couples from poor households, often living apart for long periods, defining autonomy in terms of belonging and togetherness, contributing in different ways to building a materially secure and socially respectable shared future, rather than pursuing independent and individual projects. New forms of partnership are built, with men focusing on earning and providing for their families, but this is made possible only with their wife's cooperation, through capital from dowries or education directed towards home management and the upbringing of children. Instead of interpreting this in terms of domination and subordination, both male and female agency needs to be recognised in the process of redefining conjugal norms and spaces. Both ultimately seek to build a relationship of emotional interdependence, apart from material security.

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### Notes

1. The names of the village and respondents have been changed. Manikganj district is less poor than other parts of northern and southern Bangladesh (BBS, 2009). Half the households in the village are landless and the rest have small land-holdings (less than 2 acres). Only few have higher education (10%) or are employed in white-collar jobs (less than 5%). Mobile phones are now common. Just one person owns a motorbike (Rao, 2009).
2. After pre-testing and finalising the survey questionnaire in July–August 2006, I left Bangladesh. The first phase of data collection was guided by my local research associate. I conducted the second phase along with the research associate and research assistant.
3. Its founder, Maulana Maududi, insisted that Allah had divided the spheres of work for men and women, with provision of livelihood being the job of the husband and managing the home, its material and spiritual wellbeing, of the wife (Ahmad, 2008: 556).
4. Educational gender gaps in Bangladesh have reversed in favour of girls (Shafiq, 2009). However, there are only four girls out of 38 with post-secondary education in Achingaon (village survey).
5. Eighty per cent of migrants to the garments factories were from landless or land-poor household (Afsar 2001). Many migrate for reasons like a bad marriage or accumulating money for a dowry. Paul-Majumder and Begum (2006) find the proportion of those without any education has declined over the 1990s, with mean education levels increasing from 4.1 to 6.8 years for women, though fairly stable for men at around nine years.
6. The industry has grown steadily from 30 factories in 1980 to 2500 in 1996–1997 and 4825 in 2008–2009, with employment doubling in the last decade from 1.5 to 3.1 million workers (accessed at <http://bgmea.com.bd/home/pages/aboutus>, 14 June 2010).
7. Since 2003, restrictions apply to unskilled and semi-skilled women workers under 35, who are not allowed to migrate on their own, making the number of female overseas migrants less than 5 per cent of the total (Siddiqui, 2005: 10).
8. 120 taka = £1 and 0.61 Bahraini Dinar = £1 as on 6 June 2011.
9. While the earnings overseas are higher than in the locality, substantial gains begin to flow only after working for five–six years, as remittances in the initial years go towards repayment of debts and household maintenance (Afsar et al., 2002). The migrant men hardly return home during this period, due to the costs involved and the insecurity of their jobs.
10. del Franco (2006) notes that amongst young men and women in Bangladesh, especially those with education, developing relationships based on romantic love is not uncommon.
11. Twenty is seen as quite old for a rural girl to be unmarried. In 2007, 66 per cent of women were married before the age of 18 (NIPORT, 2009). Garment workers have a higher age at marriage, only 26 per cent were married before 19 (Naved et al., 2001).
12. Paul-Majumder and Begum (2006) note that the proportion of women factory workers having 'love marriages' is relatively high; while subject to violence and harassment at the workplace and in the streets, the rates of divorce at 7 per cent are not higher than for the rest of the population.

13. Historically, the same can be said of young men in many bridewealth societies. In Cameroon, men engaged in labour migration to earn cash for payment of bridewealth, as marriage entitled them to inherit land and set up their own household (Stichter, 1985: 69).

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