

## **DREAMS OF GOOD LIVES OR SHATTERED HOPES?: LABOUR MIGRATION AND WOMEN'S WORK IN RURAL BANGLADESH**

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### **ABSTRACT**

As globalization promotes 'export processing zones, free trade zones and world market factories', it creates employment opportunities for both men and women, but especially for women (Mujahid et al 2014:8). In Bangladesh, the impact of globalization and trade liberalization is characterized by feminization of the internal labour force. The garment industry alone employs 3.6 million women (The Guardian 23 May, 2013). Availability of paid work in the factories has placed greater responsibilities on many of these women to meet the survival needs of their families (Bacchus 2005). For some, it has conferred breadwinning status. International migration of women to the Gulf States, in order to improve the family income and raise the living standard of their families is also a recent phenomenon in rural Bangladesh. In this article, I examine the economic and social consequences of different types of labour migration of the women of Char Khankhanapur and Decree Charchandpur and investigate whether or not working as migrant labourers improves their lives. I focus on how women experience their work as migrant labourers and explore the reasons underlying their decisions to migrate. I draw on the case studies of migrant women from both villages to discuss the relation between women's work and enhancement of their status from the Women in Development (WID) perspective.

**Keywords:** Labour, migration, rural women, Bangladesh, women in Development, globalization

### **Main text:**

As globalization promotes 'export processing zones, free trade zones and world market factories', it creates employment opportunities for both men and women, but especially for women (Mujahid et al 2014:8). According to Bacchus (2005), the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) influence transnational corporations (TNC) to depend on cheap female labour from developing nations to make profit. The reason for the TNCs' dependency on female labour over male labour for factories is the understanding that women are 'docile' workers and unlike men, are prepared to work under unfavourable conditions and for low wages (Jaiswal 2014:1). For many poor women,

opportunities to work in these factories are simultaneously advantageous and disadvantageous. The advantage is that they gain paid employment to support themselves and their families and the disadvantage is that in the new labour markets, they are subject to unequal wage rates and occupational segregation.

In Bangladesh, the impact of globalization and trade liberalization is characterized by feminization of the internal labour force. Globalization has transformed many poor women's work from traditional, home based activities to non-traditional, and market oriented ones. Since the 1980s, export based industries requiring cheap female labour expanded so that, 70%-80% of the work force are women (Kibria 2001:61). The garment industry alone employs 3.6 million women (The Guardian 23 May, 2013). Poor women, who migrate to cities, in quest of paid employment opportunities, are a desirable option for employers because the pool of low skilled, rural migrant women have limited choice of work, are available to work part time, are ready to work under hazardous conditions and are less likely than men to unionize (Jahan 2014: 35-36). Availability of paid work in the factories has placed greater responsibilities on many of these women to meet the survival needs of their families (Bacchus 2005). For some, it has conferred breadwinning status.

International migration of women to the Gulf States, in order to improve the family income and raise the living standard of their families is a recent phenomenon, though female migration to Dhaka as domestic workers or garment workers is very common (Afsar 2002). The underlying reasons are the increasing demand for female labour in Gulf countries, and the easing of the facilities for women to obtain foreign visas, which is still hard for men. Afsar (1998) identifies a significant relationship between migration and development in Bangladesh, particularly rural development and suggests that migration brings about economic improvement for migrants and their families who are left behind.

Based on definitions of population mobility in migration literatures (Chant & Radcliffe 1992, Parnwell 1993, Afsar 2002), I noticed certain types of migration taking place among poor women of Char Khankhanapur and Decree Charchandpur. The most common type is seasonal migration, which women of poor households consider as an essential coping strategy during livelihood crises. Oscillating migration and commuting are also familiar. My understanding of 'oscillation' depends on Chant & Radcliffe's (1992:11) 'movement involving absence from home for as little as one day, or to up to three months'. By 'commuting' I mean moving only short distances away, for work, which is temporary in nature. I also found women undertaking labour migration for relatively longer periods, such as two years or more within the country or overseas.

In this article I examine the economic and social consequences of different types of labour migration of the women of Char Khankhanapur and Decree Charchandpur and investigate whether or not working as migrant labourers improves their lives. I focus on how women experience their work as migrant labourers and explore the reasons underlying their decisions to migrate. I draw on the case studies of migrant women from both villages to discuss the relation between women's work and enhancement of their status from the Women in Development (WID) perspective.

### **Patterns of women's migration and types of work undertaken by female migrants of Char Khankhanapur and Decree Charchandpur**

In Char Khankhanapur, three out of 12 women worked as garment workers and three were domestic workers in the Gulf countries whereas five out of 11 women in Decree Charchandpur were garments workers and four worked as domestic workers or child carers in the Gulf countries. Four out of 12 women in Char Khankhanapur migrated to towns such as Rajbari and Faridpur and to Dhaka, to work at brick kilns. I also noticed that some destitute women (elderly, deserted and widowed) migrated to neighbouring villages to beg. Rarely, did they find it a viable option to migrate to the big cities and towns to take paid work, because of their ill health and financial difficulties. Pryer (1992) identifies such women in Khulna region, as 'independent female economic migrants'.

I found that in both villages, women who belong to poor and lower middle class households are migrant labourers, though it is also common among some women of upper middle class households to undertake labour migration. However, women of upper middle class households do not take jobs as garments or of domestic workers. Among 12 migrant women in Char Khankhanapur, one migrated to Dhaka to work as a bank clerk and another migrated to Faridpur to work as a school teacher. In Decree Charchandpur, out of 11 migrant women, one migrated to Kushtia to become a NGO official and the other migrated to Oman to work as nurse. As such jobs were unlikely to be readily available in the villages, these professional jobs were only open to women who received high levels of education or training. Their intention to leave the villages therefore went hand in hand with the decision to train for such occupations.

Irrespective of class, the type of support women avail from their families significantly affects the jobs that they might do. For instance, women who get support from close and extended family members in fulfilling domestic responsibilities, particularly child care, can decide to go to work in distant locations. On the other hand, those who do not have family support or hired labour for domestic and child care responsibilities, accept paid work in nearby places. Often, the type of work that women choose does not depend on their own choices, but on their family members, particularly husbands and mothers-in-law. For instance, in Decree Charchandpur, women like

Anowara and Salma took the decision to become domestic workers in Qatar, instead of starting their own home based enterprises because of their husbands' pressure. In similar vein, in Char Khankhanapur, though Selina and Joygun wanted to work in garments factories in Dhaka, they chose to work in brick kilns in Rajbari because their husbands did not support their decision to become garment workers. However, women like Bilkis and Rumana negotiated their choice of work with their family members though their decisions to work were not always based on agreement of family members. Bilkis's husband and mother-in-law did not want her to work at Faridpur brick kiln. She tried to get their agreement, but was not successful. Yet, she was firm in her decision to work, which incited household conflict. Rumana's husband was not ready to accept her garment job but she convinced him.

Getting consent of household members to undertake women's labour migration reflects the dire consequences of poverty. However, resistance from husbands that some women experienced to work outside their households expresses men's fear of losing male gender identity. For instance, according to Munia in Char Khankhanapur, when she decided to migrate to Dhaka to work as a bank clerk, her husband thought that she would no longer be docile and might disrespect him. So, he insisted she turn down the job. She found it difficult to negotiate with her husband but finally succeeded by assuring him of her obedience. Similarly, in Decree Charchandpur, when Anika wanted to accept the job of a trainee officer at BRAC in Kushtia, her husband felt his breadwinning status to be threatened and resisted her. Anika convinced him that she was not accepting the paid work to overturn his authority but to share his economic responsibilities.

Mosse, in his research on indigenous livelihoods of Bhil community (inter-border district of Rajasthan and Gujrat) in India, shows that the Bhil women take advantage of migration opportunities and development projects not because they want to free themselves from male dominance, but because they see men as failed providers (Mosse 2005:219). In Char Khankhanapur, only five out of 12 migrant women and in Decree Charchandpur, four out of 11 migrant women considered their work as a response to their husband's failure to provide. Yet, they did not see their work as a challenge to male authority and breadwinning status. Rather, as wives, they realized it as their *shohojogita* (cooperation) towards their husbands which might raise their own status within the household and wider community. This mirrors White's (2013:10) findings which show that in rural Bangladesh, women's involvement in income generating activities may not overturn 'male provision' and men's status as 'breadwinners'.

For most women in rural Bangladesh, male protection and guardianship are not only necessary to meet their economic needs but also significant for their social security. Therefore, they do not engage in work that might lead to loss of male protection. This is evident in the decision making of poor women like Selina, Rahima and Joygun, who preferred their husbands to accompany

them to brick kilns. For them, having a husband's protection in a public space such as brick kilns could protect them from unwelcome attention of their male co-workers and reduce chances of suspicion regarding their work. Moreover, their husbands' presence at the work place would confirm that they did not maintain a loose lifestyle and their sexual purity was not compromised. Their cases confirm the findings of Blanchet (2010:348). Blanchet notices that for Bangladeshi village women, who migrate with their husbands to work at the bars of Bombay, raise less suspicion in the village as their husbands' presence signalled that, as wives, they remained under the control of their husbands. For women, marriage provides 'morality and legitimacy' for their work (ibid:348).

While the liberal idea of Women in Development (WID) policies encourage women's participation in paid work to enhance gender equality, in Char Khankhanapur and Decree Charchandpur, this may not be appropriate to understand all women's work. I noticed that when women decided to undertake labour migration, it reflected their intention to ensure their household's welfare. Instead of attempting to increase their own status within household as well as wider community, they see their work as undertaken for *shongshar chalano* (maintenance of the family) or supporting *poribarar bhalo thaka* (wellbeing of close family members). However, there are also women who see their work as *nijer jonne kaaj* (work for own). For instance, in Char Khankhanapur, six migrant women identified their work as *shongshar chalanor jonne kaaj*, three considered it as *poribarar bhalo thakar jonne kaaj*, two referred to it as *thekay pore kaaj kora* (forced to work) and one conceived of it as *nijer jonne kaaj* (work for oneself). In Decree Charchandpur, four migrant women considered their work as *shongshare shukher jonne kaaj* (work for happiness in family), three identified it as *shongshar chalanor jonne kaaj*, two regarded it as *thekay pore kaaj* and two referred to it as *nijer jonne kaaj*. Women participate in *shongshar chalanor jonne kaaj* when they do not have male bread winners in their families or men's income are insufficient to pay for household expenses. They spend income from such work to meet basic necessities such as food, clothes, treatment and others. They see *shongshare shukher jonne kaaj* as necessary to enhance standard of living of household members or to meet dowry demands. *Thekay pore kaaj* means that women only participate in work under certain circumstances such as to repay debt, to cope with sudden loss of male breadwinners or to respond to their husbands' pressure to earn. Women take part in *nijer jonne kaaj* to express their autonomy and pay for their own expenses including food, clothing, cosmetics and others.

While women's work done for own reflects individuality and aspiration for freedom, work, which is intended to fulfill the purpose of household maintenance, wellbeing of close family members and happiness in families, represent altruism. Such work can be understood from the standpoint of Black/Asian feminism which suggests that though many Black/Asian women's experiences in families may reproduce inequalities, families are also a source of support and

peace for them. It is through families that they express their positive identities. Hence, working for the benefit of households reveals their own understandings of work, different from white, western values. Particularly, women's preference of their husbands' presence at work place, indicates their consideration of themselves not as victims of patriarchy, rather as beneficiaries of it who see male guardianship as their strength and support in anonymous social settings.

Whether for household welfare or individual benefit, women's labour migration, fuelled by livelihood crisis or expanding economic opportunities, has given a new meaning to women's work, which has brought varied effects on their families. As poor women, who were involved in peasant economies and depended on subsistence agriculture, are increasingly migrating to cities and to the oil rich Gulf countries in search of paid work, most frequently as domestic or industrial workers (Blanchet et al 2002), such transformation of rural women's labour is leading towards the process of 'de-peasantisation', bringing cosmopolitanism in village life and introducing new patterns of consumption and economic opportunities (Mosse 2005:72). This can be illustrated with the cases of Feroza and Rahela. In 2013, Feroza belonged to a poor farming household in Char Khankhanapur. Feroza worked as a *kheti* woman (woman farmer) on her husband's agricultural plot by undertaking post harvesting activities and, animal care in addition to dealing with the household chores. However, Feroza's husband could not extract profit from farming and wanted to change his profession. He started demanding money from Feroza. In order to fulfil her husband's demand, Feroza, took the decision to migrate to Dhaka in search of employment as a garment factory worker. Throughout her employment period she remitted money to her husband, which he used to buy a three wheeler pedal van and a mobile phone.

Rahela, unlike Feroza, belonged to a lower middle class farming household in Decree Charchandpur. Her husband wanted to set up a grocery store in the local market and demanded capital for the business from Rahela's parents. Her parents were very poor and could not afford to fulfill the demand. So, she took the opportunity to migrate to Oman as a child carer for a short term contract of two years. Since then, she sent home about 1,00,000 taka (GBP 1000) which allowed her husband to establish a grocery business and let her two daughters attend a private college. In addition, the family home was refurbished and a television was bought with the remitted money.

Both Feroza and Rahela's cases highlight two factors: the transformation of rural livelihoods from agricultural to non-agricultural and the significance of women's work as the means of dowry payment. While they were part of farming households, their work included household chores and agricultural activities. With their shift to migrant labour, their work pattern changed. The income from paid work has created aspirations for modern items such as mobile phones in Feroza's case and desire for televisions and obtaining western style education for her children in

Rahela's case, which signals a new consumption culture and reflects cosmopolitan rural lives. It is noticeable that for both of them, participation in paid work is a response to fulfil the dowry demands of their husbands. While Rozario (2001:140) finds that the most desirable form of dowry in rural Bangladesh is to provide the cost of migration for husbands, both Feroza's and Rahela's cases suggest that women's labour migration may itself act as a source of dowry payment. This finding supports Blanchet et al (2002:73-74), who similarly identifies dowry payment as one of the determining factors behind women's choice of international labour migration. The demand for cash by Feroza and Rahela's husbands also confirms White's (2013:1) finding in two villages of north-western Bangladesh which shows that many young men in rural Bangladesh intend to establish themselves in the modern economy through using dowry, serving as capital for business and career advancement.

Feroza and Rahela's decision to work for fulfilling the dowry demands of their husbands questions the liberal premise of the WID paradigm. Despite the fact that Feroza and Rahela's labour migration has brought marked changes in the consumption culture of their households, it does not support the claim made by the WID policies that incorporation of women in paid labour enhances women's status. I argue that if women's their work is intended to pay for dowry, it emphasizes loss of their dignity. Dowry, which involves cash, jewellery or other types of assets, which are transferred from brides' families to grooms' families, is a traditional Bangladeshi marriage practice. Though dowry is usually negotiated prior to marriage as a one off payment, like in many other parts of South Asia, in Bangladesh, it is a continued process and grooms' families expect brides' families to go on donating cash and goods even after marriage. As a channel to ensure economic benefits for men and their families, dowry, thus, acts as the 'patriarchal norms of superiority', which devalue women (Huda 2006:258). My argument is that if women's work, as labour migrants, turns into means of men's exploitation of women, in the form of dowry, it reinforces 'patriarchal materialism' (ibid: 253). I also argue that such materialist expression of patriarchy overturns WID's emphasis on women's work as an avenue of improving their status. Nonetheless, whether women's work as labour migrants increases or decreases their status is not straight forward to decipher, as their experiences of work shows much ambivalence. In the following sections, such ambivalences will be discussed.

### **Women's work as migrants within Bangladesh**

In the 1980s, some poor women from both villages started to migrate to Dhaka to work in garment factories. By the 1990s, women's labour migration to large cities for factory jobs accelerated its pace. Since then, women's labour migration has turned into a 'cultural event', which according to Gidwani & Sivaramakrishnan (2003:190), refers to a process that transforms migrants subjectivities and notions of 'place'. I noticed such process when I realized how labour

migration, though being an 'economic event' (Dannecker 2007:4), brought changes in women's understandings of work and their identities.

One among three garments workers in Char Khankhanapur and three out of five garments workers in Decree Charchandpur, welcomed their factory jobs as *shommanjonok kaaj* (respectful work) and considered opportunity to work in a garment factory better than other jobs available. They referred to garments work as *chakri* (job) distinguishing it from *bandir kaaj* (work of a servant), by which they meant domestic work performed in wealthy households. According to them, as garment workers they could earn higher wages and be entitled to be designated as *chakrijibi* (salaried employee), both of which increased their sense of self respect.

Among the four women who worked as short term contract labourers in brick kilns, Bilkis stated that she decided to work because she wanted to be self reliant. She believed that if she could earn her own income, her status in the family would improve. She was motivated by the idea that 'taka kotha bole' (money talks). For her, taking paid work outside the household was not shameful, rather she realised her new status as an 'economic person' as enhancing her decision making power within the household. However, Rahima, Selina and Joygun, accepted to work in brick kilns mainly for their households' advancement. Rahima, for instance, wanted money for her children's education. For Selina, the reason was to repay the debt, incurred by her husband's failed migration to Dubai and Joygun chose to work because her husband's income was insufficient to maintain the household.

Reasons for entering into garment work involved push and pull factors. In Char Khankhanapur, Rina wanted to work to support her mother's medical expenses, Feroza, became a garment worker to fulfil her husband's dowry demand and Rumana migrated to Dhaka to work in a garment factory because she wanted to experience outside employment in an urban setting.

In Decree Charchandpur, among five women who worked as garments workers in Dhaka, Sima chose to escape from the tyranny of her mother-in-law. She believed that working outside the household would give her freedom. Rumi worked to repay the microcredit debt, which her husband took but refused to repay. For Razia, garment work was the only viable option after her husband left her alone with two children. Roksana became a garment worker because she wanted to have a *chakri* (job) and be a modern woman. Considering participation in paid work as an expression of modernity, she said, *aajkal meyera ki ghore thake? kaaj ei meyeder dam* (nowadays women do not stay at home, it is through their work that they are valued). Helena, however, started working in a garment factory in Dhaka because her husband died and she became responsible for the upkeep of her family.



According to Gardner & Osella (2003:xii), migration is a 'contradictory and ambiguous process of change'. I support such claim by showing that women's experiences of labour migration and their effects on women are not uniform. In Char Khankhanapur, among four women who worked at brick kilns, one considered the work as means of improvement of status, two realized it as deteriorating social status but providing material benefits and one accepted the work as having negative effect on life because of loss of *shamman* (honour). Work at brick kilns vary not only between men and women but also among women themselves. While men are responsible for labour intensive work such as carrying and supplying raw materials to hot furnaces, some women perform tasks of shaping and finishing bricks in set dices and some others cook. For instance, Bilkis's work was that of *karigor* (manufacturer) which involved laying and sorting the bricks in patterns, but for others work meant *baburchir kaaj* (work of cook) which included cooking, fetching water for cooking, drinking and cleaning. Though all of them worked as contract labourers, their wages varied based on the type of work. Women who work as a *karigor* are paid higher wages than those who do *baburchir kaaj* as such work requires skill and involve long working hours. Bilkis was contracted for six months and got a total of thirty thousand taka (GBP 300) for the entire contract period. However, Rahima, Selina and Joygun received only ten thousand taka (GBP 100) for their contracts as cooks. During the period of their contracts, all these women had to unfailingly abide by the rigid terms and conditions of work set by influential labour contractors, locally known as *sardar*.

Bilkis, a childless woman in her early thirties, worked eight hours a day for six days a week. She enjoyed her work because it not only helped her to get rid of bitter words of her mother-in-law, but it endowed her with freedom and economic prosperity. The money from her work offset her childlessness for a while, as her mother-in-law appreciated the income to be spent on household expenditure. Though Bilkis's work induced conflict in the family at first, the material gain was its compensation. Because of her income, she was labelled by her husband and mother-in-law as *lokhhki bou* (good wife, named after the Hindu goddess of wealth) instead of *opoya* (ill fated).

Rahima and Joygun were both in their late thirties and had children. Every day, they worked for nine hours and cooked for around hundreds of people who worked at brick kilns. Unlike Bilkis, they did not get paid leave. They had to work even if they were ill. Both of the women's health was badly affected by long hours of work. Rahima got chronic back ache because of carrying heavy water buckets and sitting while cooking. Joygun suffered from eye irritations caused by wood smoke. Though they worked hard, they had to bear harsh criticisms from co-workers and employers if the food was not to their taste.

Besides working under such stressful conditions, both Rahima and Joygun had to perform *ghorer kaaj* (household work), such as cooking and washing after they returned home. According to

Rahima, *sharadin bhatay kaaj kori takar jonne ar ghorer kaaj to shongsharer kaaj, ami na korle, shongshar cholbe kemne?* (whole day I work for money and housework is work for the family, if I do not do household work how will the house run?). Joygun, similarly accentuated her routine of regular housework upon her return. Though Rahima's sister-in-law and Joygun's mother-in-law supported them with child care, often their children suffered from illness. Yet, Joygun stated, *kaaje koshto thakleo je taka pai tai diye obhab chcharai shongshar chole* (though working is painful, it brings money which helps to run the household without any economic scarcity). Rahima also asserted that despite the stress involved, her income allowed her to pay for her children's education and buy household necessities.

Selina's working condition was similar to Rahima and Joygun, but, unlike Rahima and Joygun, she considered working at brick kilns as shameful and demeaning. She averred that she would not work at the brick kiln if she did not have to repay her husband's debt. She noticed that some male co-workers, who addressed her as *bhabi* (sister-in-law), shared indecent jokes with her, when her husband was not around. She found this disgraceful and consulted with her husband if she could leave the job. But, as her husband took the contract money on behalf of her, she could not leave work unless her contract ended or the money was returned to the employer. She said, *ami taka aay korleo, taka thake tar haate (even if I earn, the money is his). She further added, ei taka aay korte ami ajke bari chchara* (I am homeless today only to earn this money). She missed her children at home with her in-laws. For her, work was nothing but a *srinkhol* (chain).

Stressful working conditions and verbal abuse were also reported by Rina and Feroza of Char Khankhanapur and Rumi and Sima of Decree Charchandpur, who worked at garment factories in Dhaka. Rina and Feroza worked as 'helpers' on factory floors. As they did not have any previous experience of garment work, they had to encounter frequent *gali* (bad words) from line managers for simple mistakes. They worked ten to twelve hours, six days a week with unspecified hours of overtime. Being among the less skilled workers, they often did not receive wages for overtime work. Factory managers told them that overtime was part of their training as apprentices. Rina explained that many women workers did not receive their salaries regularly and if asked for money, floor supervisors and factory managers threatened to dismiss them from work. To exemplify harsh working condition, Feroza added that she had to work without any break, except ten minutes for lunch. Sometimes, floor supervisors denied her access to the toilet and verbally abused her if they found her talking to other women. Rina and Feroza, both, therefore, compared the factory entrance to a jail gate. From morning till evening, they had to work in a room heated by blazing lights without sufficient ventilation. Often they had to work late at night. After returning to their accommodation, which was shared by four other women workers, they could not rest. They had to cook dinner and prepare breakfast and lunch for next day. They usually went to bed around midnight.

Though garments work presented similar experiences for Rina and Feroza, it had different implications for each of them. While Feroza's work enabled her husband to diversify his livelihood and minimized chances of domestic violence, for Rina, work became the source of marital conflict. Rina expected to send money to her aged mother and spend some of her earnings on personal expenses, but her husband wanted all the money for his own purposes. She knew that her husband would gamble the money and refused to give it to him. This resulted in physical beating, which forced her to give in. Yet, she did not think of getting divorce from her husband, as she considered divorce as *lojja* (shame).

Sima started working in a garment factory before her marriage, during her late teens. She could save sufficient money to support herself and assist her family. She enjoyed working and the freedom it brought. After marriage, she left work but returned shortly. For the first few months, her husband appreciated her work but the appreciation turned into dissatisfaction when she returned home late. To ease such dissatisfaction, she agreed to her husband's demand of having a child. Throughout her pregnancy, she experienced difficulty at work. Factory management was not ready to give her maternity benefit or sufficient opportunity to rest. She had to work even at the ninth month of her pregnancy and could get only leave for one week, following child birth. Though she had her elder sister's support to look after her child, she had to do *ghorer kaaj* (household work) after she returned.

Rumi started to work with much enthusiasm as a seamstress in a garment factory near Dhaka, but she became disillusioned when she experienced verbal and sexual abuses from male colleagues. She noticed that when male supervisors were around, they had *ku-nojor* (bad look) and made indecent comments on her bodily features. Chances of sexual abuses by strange men, on her way to home from work, in dark evenings or late nights also worried her. She, therefore, decided to give up garments work as soon as she could repay debt.

Garments work was, however, a welcoming and positive experience for Rumana, Razia, Rokhsana and Helena. Rumana realized that garments work not only freed her from monotonous domestic work, it also provided her with the opportunity to become an independent person. She could make economic contribution towards family expenses and her husband consulted her while taking decisions. He also helped her in managing household chores. She said, garments work had made her *chhalak* (clever) and enhanced her *shahosh* (courage) to face the challenges of life. Rokhsana's was similar experience. She said, garments work allowed her to have freedom lead modern lifestyle. Her individual earning helped her to set up a separate household to avoid conflict with in-laws. From four years of work, she saved money in her personal bank account to start a tailor's shop at local bazaar (market). She also invested in two saving schemes to support her daughter's higher education. She believed garment work changed her life for the better.

'Chakri' (job) in garment factories helped Razia and Helena to live with respect. Both worked at EPZ (Export Process Zone) factories in Savar, near Dhaka as sewing machine operators. They reported that in EPZ factories, though factory managers treated them well, floor supervisors were sometimes rude. According to Razia, her income helped her feel more stable than before, while Helena, considered her work as means of progress for her family. Both accentuated that their income raised their living standards and enhanced their status. They also expressed their desire to send their daughters to colleges and universities, which they believed would ensure better lives to their daughters.

Labour migration experiences not only varied among poor women, they also show marked variations among some upper middle class women. For instance, Munia realized that though her work as a bank clerk in Dhaka raised her status within the wider community, it damaged her relations with her husband and in-laws. During the first few months of her work, she had to undertake training which prevented her from visiting home regularly. Her husband and mother-in-law did not accept her absence from home and pressurized her to leave the job. Though she spent her income to pay for household expenses and to buy gifts for her husband and in-laws to ensure *shukh-shanti* (happiness and peace), she did not find *shukh* (happiness).

Anika considered her work as a source of freedom as well as conflict. Like Munia, she also experienced repeated pressure from her husband to leave NGO work, because he believed that she would visit different places and meet strange men at work. She described the first six months of her work as very stressful as she needed to take new responsibilities at office and had to do most of the household chores. However, gradually, the situation started to get better as her economic situation improved. Yet, whenever she had to go away to attend professional training, marital conflict arose. But, she did not leave work as work was a means to discovering an identity of her own.

Shikha's experience of working as a teacher in Faridpur was not as challenging as that of Munia and Anika. Her husband supported her decision to migrate to Faridpur as a residential school teacher. She stayed at school accommodation on week days and visited home every weekend. Her mother-in-law and younger sister-in-law took care of her children while she was not present at home. She also hired two domestics to perform *ghorer kaaj* (household work). She felt that because of working at school, she was respected more than before, not only by members of her extended family but also by others in society. Though she did not work out of economic necessity, she realized that her ability to make economic contributions to her family enhanced her decision making power within household.

Based on the differences between women's testimonies regarding their work as migrants, I argue that while the WID proposition claims that women's equal participation in paid work improves

women's status, variations of women's experiences of work between and within the same class, challenge such claim. I show that women experience multiple realities. For instance, in the context of working at garment factories, work was stressful for both Rina and Feroza, but its effects were different for them. Razia and Helena's experiences of work varied depending on the types of factories they worked in. Again, while Rumana considered garment work as a positive opportunity, Rumi's experience of work was disappointing. Sima and Anika's experiences, show that work can have varied consequences for a woman. While garment work was beneficial for Sima before her marriage, after marriage, it brought her distress. Anika's NGO work was simultaneously a source of freedom and conflict.

Drawing on Stanley's (1990) concept of 'standpoint pluralism' (cited in Longino 1993: 205), I argue that whether women's participation in paid work improves their lives, should be understood in the context of women's varied realities. Bilkis's case suggests that she could defy traditional power structures and the authority of her household and benefit from work because she was free from childcare and did not have obligations to perform household chores. Her working environment was also congenial and encouraging. However, Rahima and Joygun not only worked under stress, they had to accept additional loads of housework, including child care. For them, material gain was at the expense of *shamman* (honour) which confirms the finding of Kabeer (1991). Kabeer shows that though rural women's presence in public places such as brick kilns or road constructions is associated with considerable stress and shame, it provides them with entitlement to resources 'other than those associated with socially ascribed relations of dependence' (ibid: 253). However, Kabeer's finding does not fit with Selina's case. Though Selina's honour was sacrificed because of working, she did not have any control on her income. Rather, it was her husband who was entitled to the money she earned. Moreover, instead of improving her status, receipt of advancement payment of labour contract, put her in a forced working condition.

Experiences of some upper middle class women like Anika and Munia also emphasize that though women earn money, they may not always control their income. Findings of Kibria (1995) and Amin et al (1998) illustrate and explain this. Kibria (1995:297) notices that among garment factory workers, many women, irrespective of class, hand over their wages to male family members. Amin et al (1998) identify that though women contribute towards family income, they may not necessarily participate in household decision making. My argument is that if men are to control women's income and male superiority is thus reaffirmed, it challenges WID's promise of improving women's status and enhancing gender equality.

Working at garment factories also has varied effects on women. To some women, it gives leverage to renegotiate the patriarchal contract within the family (Kabeer 2004), for others, it is a

source of fear and tension as well as denigration (Siddiqi 2003:49). Experiences of Rumana, Rokhsana, Razia and Helena highlight that participation in paid work increased their economic as well as social abilities. Their capacity to contribute to family expenditure not only enhanced their confidence and bargaining power, it also raised their aspiration for modernity. In this context, my understanding of modernity depends on what Gardner & Osella (2003:xi) proposed as 'a set of imaginings and beliefs about the way life should be, as well as a host of associated practices'. Hence, variations of women's expressions of modernity also confirm Gardner & Osella's assertions that 'what constitutes modernity is not fixed' and different people experience modernity in different ways (ibid:xii). It can be noticed that Rumana considers expenditure on luxury items such as cosmetics and trendy clothing as modernity. However, Rokhsana sees certain aspects, such as changes in attire, possession of individual bank account, ability to invest in daughter's education and set up separate shonghshar (family), as expressions of modernity. According to Razia and Helena, their aspirations for daughters' higher education indicate progress.

The cases of Rina, Feroza and Sima, suggest that although garment work gives families more financial breathing room, it imposes heavy work load on wives and mothers. Men's reluctance in doing housework can be translated as the expression of their own identity, possessed in relation to their gender role within the household, which they do not want to negotiate (Kabeer 2000:124). Sima's case illustrates how sexual jealousy influences men to adopt non-cooperative attitude towards working women. We see that though initially, Sima's husband appreciated her work, the unusual length of working hours at the factory, which caused her late return at home, incited household conflict. Her husband considered her prolonged absence from home as sign of infidelity and to minimize such anxiety, he insisted her on becoming a mother. Somewhat similar findings are evident in Kabeer's (2000) research among women workers at Bangladeshi garment factories. Kabeer shows that in factory employment concerns about women's reputations take intense form in the context of marital relations because in such case men's anxieties about women's modesty are channeled through sexual jealousies and fears about women's disloyalty (ibid:125). She points out that motherhood being considered as a means for muting women's sexuality, reduces men's doubts and allows wives to work in factories (ibid:125). Men's anxiety due to women's presence in public spaces, is also revealed through incidents of sexual harassments, as evident in Rumi's case. Rumi's experience of sexual harassment by her male co-workers inside the factory gave her the message that she was transgressing the patriarchal order, altering traditional expectations held by men about women. Because of her fear of losing *shamman* (honour), she, finally, decided to leave her job Her decision to leave the job mirrors Siddiqi's (2003:47) claim that while a woman's honour is her most valuable asset, 'harassment, sexual or otherwise, strikes at the heart of that honour'.

Extensive working hours of women like Sima, Feroza, Rina and others indicate exposure of women to exploitative relations of production under global capitalism. It is evident from Rina and Feroza's cases that though women work hard for long hours on the factory floor, they are not only denied overtime payment by employers, but they are also paid very little. The attitude of floor supervisors and line managers to insist women without breaks and not letting them use required toilet facilities represent the harshest form of exploitation of women. Rumi's case illustrates the way women workers are sexually harassed by male co-workers and employers alike, which remain underreported because of women's fear of losing their job as well as their honour. Sima's case highlights that male oriented factory policies deny women's rights as mothers by curtailing their maternity leave and proper child care facilities.

Karl Marx refers 'reserve army of labour' as the basic characteristic of capitalism (Magdoff & Magdoff 2004). Women's exploitative working conditions at garments factories can be analyzed within the context of a 'reserve army of labour'. According to the reserve army of labour debate, while surplus labouring population is an essential part of accumulation or development of wealth on capitalist basis, if surplus population is available to capital, they become the disposable work force and are replaced by owners of capital according to the needs of capital. Poor women, who flock as unskilled labour migrants to big cities such as Dhaka, form the reserve army of labour for international capital. The apparently unlimited supply of female work force not only permits the garment factory owners to exploit women workers (Kabeer & Mahmud 2004:108), but it also helps them to keep production costs down. To maximize profit, factory owners decrease employee benefits and utilize migrant women's labour by employing or dismissing them according to the labour demand of the factories, guided by international market orders. Moreover, because large pool of female labourers are readily available to garment factories, factory owners often prefer to place women in low skill based job and continue to pay them low wages compared to male workers (Paul-Majumder & Begum 2000, cited in Khosla 2009:295). If the WID concern is to promote gender equality through ensuring women's participation in paid work, does such discrimination in employment opportunity increase women's status? How can the dynamics between male managers and female garment workers, which recreates the same patriarchal structure, found in many family settings and within larger society, guarantee gender equality?

I argue that consideration of women's labour as a replaceable part of the production process by garment factory owners not only enhances capitalist wealth accumulation, but also signals the devaluation of women's labour and gender inequality. Following Shiva (1989:4), it is my contention that commercialization of women's labour under global capitalism reflects 'patriarchal bias' and reinforces the process of 'maldevelopment' because it considers women's subsistence work as unproductive, not producing any surplus. Garment employers fail to recognize that

participation in wage earning work in garment factories does not always free women from performing household work and child care. Alam et al (2011) show that as most factories do not have child care facilities, women workers need to stay separated from their children for long hours due to excessive production targets and frequent night shifts. These circumstances are particularly difficult for women with babies. I argue that such devaluation of motherhood reflects a reductionist WID mentality and creates a 'new form of dominance' over women (Shiva 1989:5).

### **Women's work as migrants abroad**

Since Bangladeshi government has relaxed restrictions on labour migration of unskilled and semi skilled women in 2003 (Siddiqui & Farah 2011), many low skilled women in Char Khankhanapur and Decree Charchandpur have regarded migration as an avenue of making progress. International migration, which Siddiqui (2003:1) defines as 'movement of people from one country to another to improve their livelihoods', is regarded as an opportunity by many poor women because of the potential it offers for high economic return. Most poor women's choices of migration destination are limited to the Gulf States, commonly known to them as *arab desh* (Islamic States). For Muslim women, preference to undertake labour migration at *arab desh* is influenced by Islamic traditions, lifestyle and wealth of Gulf countries, but for Hindu women, economic benefit remains the prime concern. According to some Muslim women, migrating to Islamic countries provides them with a firm background from which to negotiate the acceptability of foreign employment with family members. The Islamic way of life of certain destination countries acts as unwritten insurance against unfaithful and immoral lifestyle, which lessens the 'uneasiness' and 'shame' (Blanchet et al 2002:3) associated with women's choice to work abroad. Though some poor women reported that they end up in doing sex work in their destination countries, I noted that the illusive appreciation of faithful and moral lifestyle of *arab desh* is maintained, because women refrain from making their sex work experiences public.

While short term labour migration is the dominant form of international migration from Bangladesh (Siddiqui 2003:i), women of both villages migrate to the Gulf States to work on two to five years contracts. Unskilled, poor women often emigrate through unofficial channels, managed by intermediaries known as *dalal* (Blanchet et al 2002:7). However, semi skilled migration takes place officially, through the Ministry of Labour and Employment. Two among three Gulf migrant women in Char Khankhanapur and three out of five women in Decree Charchandpur reported that they went abroad unofficially, because of their personal acquaintance with *dalal*.

Several push and pull factors shape women's choice of international migration. Blanchet et al (2002:73-74) show that poor women from Bangladesh immigrate to Middle Eastern countries not only to become self-reliant and to improve the economic conditions of their families, but also to



escape bad marriage and to pay for dowry. Other push factors include husbands' pressure on them to work abroad and husbands' irresponsibility towards household responsibilities. Adhikari (2006:95) notes the reasons that trigger Nepali women's labour migration are repaying debts, sickness of family members or difficulties in coping with husbands and in-laws. Afsar (2009:11) also identifies similar reasons that influence women from Dhaka, Narayanganj, Sylhet and Laxmipur of Bangladesh to choose international migration. In Char Khankhanapur and Decree Charchandpur, women's emigration to Gulf States reflects these factors. For instance, in Char Khankhanapur, Lubna went to Jordan to with the aim of becoming rich like her neighbour, Josna. She believed that if she could find work at *arab desh* (Islamic States), she would make a lot of money within a short time. Fatema decided to emigrate to Saudia Arabia because she wanted to escape from an ongoing family feud with her brother-in-law. Afroza, however, went to Dubai because she wanted to ensure better futures for her children. In Decree Charchandpur, Rahela's decision to migrate to Oman was to fulfill her husband's dowry demand, while Anwara and Salma went to Qatar because of pressure from husbands. Their husbands informed them that the cost of migration for women was less and they should take the opportunity to work abroad and earn money for the family. Sajeda immigrated to Jordan because of the influence of *dalals* (intermediaries). Rubi went to Saudia Arabia to enrich her work experience and lead a prosperous life. Except Rubi and Rahela, all women undertook labour migration as foreign domestic workers. I label 'foreign' to denote these international female migrants so that they can be distinguished from local domestic workers. My understanding of foreign domestic worker hence reflects that of Heyzer & Wee (1994:31) who consider foreign domestic worker as someone who 'comes from another country' and does the 'domestic work of home'.

Domestic work refers to 'duties performed in the private household involving caring, child-rearing, attending to daily object related and person-related demands, and providing support and advice' (Lutz 2011:7). Women, as foreign domestic workers, therefore, need to do a range of activities as their 'work'. Based on types of work that employers ask them to do, women workers categorize work as *bhalo kaaj* (good work) and *kharap kaaj* (bad work). *Bhalo kaaj* refers to daily chores such as cooking, cleaning and child care or other formal work, whereas sex work is considered as *kharap kaaj*. I noticed that women, who could retain their *shamman* (honour) at work, considered foreign domestic work as *bhalo kaaj*, channeled through '*bhalo visa*' (Afsar (2009:11). Yet, according to them, '*a bhalo visa*' might not always promise *bhalo kaaj* as there were chances that they had to do *kharap kaaj* despite emigrating with '*bhalo visa*'. For instance, Lubna and Afroza of Char Khankhanapur and Salma and Sajeda of Decree Charchandpur reported that though they bought '*bhalo visa*' from *dalal*, they were forced to do *kharap kaaj* by their foreign employers.

To understand whether international labour migration improves women's status, I depend on ten assessment indicators developed by Siddiqui (2001). Siddiqui looks into both social and economic costs and benefits of short term international migration of Bangladeshi women. Focusing on the economic impact of female labour migration on migrant families, the ten indicators of assessment are:

- reasonable length of stay abroad, or returning home before one year of stay.
- reasonable flow of remittance, or inability to generate remittance.
- repaying loans for migration, or inability to repay the loan.
- buying land or inability to buy any land.
- constructing a house, or inability to construct a house.
- investing in business, or inability to invest in business.
- increase in income as percentage of family income, or no increase in income as percentage of family income.
- substantially bearing the subsistence costs of a family for a prolonged period, or inability to bear the subsistence costs of a family.
- generating savings, or inability to generate enough or any savings.
- improved living standard or general deterioration in living standard.

Based on these indicators, I found that among the sample cases, international labour migration turned into economically successful events for only two out of three women in Char Khankhanapur and three out of five women in Decree Charchandpur.

Lubna went to Jordan with a labour contract of three years. She remitted about two lakh BDT (about 2000 GBP) in her husband's name and managed to bring one lakh BDT (about 1000 GBP) when she returned home. Her foreign income allowed her family to have a *paka ghor* (tin roofed brick built house) and a television. Her husband could also buy a piece of agricultural land adjacent to their household. She said, she could bring 'change' and provide a better life to her family. Though she expressed guilt when she mentioned doing *kharap kaaj* at her employer's house, she accepted it as her fate. According to her, *bhalo kisu pete hole mullo dite hoi* (every good thing has its cost).

Fatema worked as a domestics as well as child carer in Saudi Arabia for five consecutive years (contract renewed twice). She remitted money in her eldest son's name every couple of months, which he deposited at Fatema's savings bank account. She also invested about one lakh BDT (about 1000 GBP) in her son's poultry business and helped him expand the business. Her newly built brick house and presence of modern items such as satellite television, refrigerator, fancy wooden furniture and a big dish antenna on the roof clearly signaled the wealthy status of her

family. She said she enjoyed foreign food and lifestyle. She also performed hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca), which was the greatest satisfaction of her life. Upon her return, she started wearing *burkha* (veil) and considered it as symbol of high social status. She claimed that labour migration to Saudi Arabia strengthened her *iman* (belief in Allah). For her, chance to stay at *nobir desh* (land of prophet) was *shoubhaggo* (matter of fortune).

Although Afroza was sent by a *dalal* (intermediary) to Dubai to work as foreign domestics, after two days of entering her employer's house, she realized that his promises were fake and he sent her to do *kharap kaaj* (bad work). She was upset and refused to do such work. Her employer sent her back to Bangladesh immediately. She returned empty handed, without any savings. Upon return, her husband did not welcome her. Rather, he cursed her for losing the chance of earning better income. She blamed herself and considered her failure as *durbhaggo* (ill fate).

Anwara and Salma, both immigrated to Qatar together, but their experiences of work were different. Anwara earned well and sent money to her family regularly. Her income supported her husband to buy agricultural land and modern machinery. She could also make savings. According to her, many people see her as an exemplar of making progress within short time. However, she repeatedly pointed out how she missed her children during her stay in Qatar. Unlike Anwara, Salma, had a difficult experience at her employer's house. She did not receive regular payment, so was unable to send money to her husband. During her one year in Qatar, she could send home only 50,000 BDT (about 500 GBP). She had no savings. When she returned home, with utmost despair, she found that her husband remarried without her permission and her only son was left with her in-laws. In her words, *bidesh jaya shob harailam* (I lost all for going to the foreign land).

Sajeda's story was similar to Salma. She paid 40,000 BDT (about 400 GBP) as labour migration cost to a *dalal* and left for Jordan, leaving her children with mother-in-law. However, she found no one to receive her at the airport even after waiting a day and half. With the help of airport police, she tried to contact her employer and came to realize that she did not have any job offer. A local taxi driver placed her at his friend's house. At the new place, she was kept locked up and not allowed to communicate with anyone. She was also forced to do *kharap kaaj*. After a month, she managed to escape from the house and somehow reached the Bangladeshi High Commission, from where she was sent home. By the time she reached home, she had no money and no *shamman* (honour). Her husband lost his land to the money lender and blamed her for wasting so much money to emigrate. He was also reluctant to take her back in *shongshar* (family). He claimed that as she had been staying in other men's house, she might have lost her *shamman*.

For Rubi, labour migration as a nurse was a fruitful experience. Working at Saudi hospital not only enriched her work experience and skills as a nurse, but it also brought her good income and

modern lifestyle. Foreign employment also freed her from an abusive marital relationship. Before she left Bangladesh, she asked her mother and elder sister to look after her children. Since last five years she sent money for them every month and invested money in a business venture, managed by her nephew. She contributed money in building a two storey building family home and the regular flow of remittance allowed her elder sister to become an influential money lender. During her first home visit, she also brought a television for her mother and gold ornaments for her sisters. Because of such generous monetary contribution and gifts, she was an important person in her family and family members consulted her before taking major decisions.

Variation in women's experiences of work as international labour migrants, depicted above, overturns WID's straight forward claim that participation in paid work improves women's status and enhances gender equality. Rather, it suggests that whether women benefit from labour migration depends on the kind of employment situation which shapes their work. For instance, Fatema and Rubi's experiences fit with WID's claim. Their cases show that their secured working conditions, better income and ability to send regular remittances at home improved their status. However, other women's experiences reflect corruption, criminality and inhumane working conditions, the likelihood of which is connected to everyday misogyny and casual sexism within Bangladesh and the societies to which these women are directed to migrate. I argue that advocates of WID position are naive to think that corruption and criminality would not creep in and have a negative effect on working women.

Employment in domestic service is transient in nature, usually for one or two year period, subject to renewal. Gidwani & Sivaramakrishnan (2003:341) show that domestic workers in Chennai, India, who participate in circuits of circular migration in pursuit of precarious livelihoods, have neither job security nor elevated social status. Similar situation is evident in cases of Afroza and Sajeda. Both of them were exploited by their employers and had to return before they could get any monetary benefit. Although foreign domestic work increases agentive capacities of women like Lubna, Fatema and Anwara, the cases of Salma, Afroza and Sajeda illustrate that increasing supply of unskilled female international migrants undervalues women's labour and makes them vulnerable to verbal and sexual abuses. Afsar (2009:38) reports physical and verbal abuse and sexual harassment of international domestic workers by employers or employers' male relatives. A study of International Organization for Migration (IOM), carried out between March and May 2013 among 101 returning Bangladeshi female migrants, also finds that two in three Bangladeshi women going overseas to work are abused by their employers. The New Migration and Overseas Employment Act 2011, enacted on 05 November, 2006 though promises to ensure rights of Bangladeshi female workers to choose quality employment and protect their dignity and security within and outside the country, in reality, this is not the case. I argue that if women's participation in overseas employment becomes source of exploitation of their labour, does it

fulfill WID's promise of improving women's status? Rather, commodification of women's labour for domestic purpose secures interests of global capitalism. Overseas employment of female workers benefits big businesses such as formal and informal labour exporting agencies, remittance managing services, banks, insurance companies, currency dealers and many others (Heyzer & Wee 1994:32). Navigating through the path of multiple interests of these complicated big businesses, is it always possible for poor women to benefit from international labour migration?

In case of Bangladesh, Belanger & Rahman (2013: 363) show that it is unlikely that left behind husbands of migrant women take on the wife's role in the family. I noticed that only few women like Lubna and Anwara could ensure their husbands' support to take care of children in their absence. Their cases reflect a new gender ideology, where men take part in caring responsibilities and women become breadwinners. However, others needed to seek child care support from extended female family members. According to Lutz (2011:190), the particular challenge that most migrant women experience, as foreign domestic workers, is 'transnational motherhood'. As transnational mothers, they 'mentally connect multiple households, the one that is their workplace and the one that they have left behind and they must be capable of establishing closeness and intimacy across great distances' (ibid:190). This is evident in migrant women's attempts to make home visits and phone calls. By bringing foreign gifts for children during home visits and expressing concern from miles away, they try to maintain closeness with their children. I, therefore, argue that the WID's claim that women's participation in paid work will promote gender equality, is not always appropriate. Rather, passing on child care responsibilities of working women to other female family members (mothers, sisters, daughters or other female relatives), perpetuates gender inequality and reinforces the gendered understanding of child care as women's work.

Like the successful Izhava migrants of Kerala, South India, as shown by Osella & Osella (2006:570), international labour migration brought some degree of social mobility for women. Building of brick houses, purchase of agricultural land, use of modern consumption items such as television, refrigerator, mechanized farming, foreign dress pattern and satellite dish antennas consolidate their middle class status and represent modern lifestyle. According to Gardner & Osella (2003:xvi), such consumption is central to migrants' attempt to 'reinvent' themselves as 'modern', since goods which they bring home also involve imaginings of foreign places and the type of modernity found there. Expensive gifts that some migrant women like Lubna and Rubi bring for their family members symbolize their families' improved social status and aspirations for modernity. Overseas labour migration also help to enhance women's decision making power within their households. For example, overseas employment enabled Rubi to become more agentic and gave her strength to fight against husband's abusive behaviour. Like many other

female transnational labour migrants, paid work allowed her to question existing gender hierarchies.

However, Afroza, Salma and Sajeda's cases illustrate that international migration may simultaneously 'unsettle' patriarchal gender order and further subordinate women after they return home (Belanger & Rahman 2013:357). All of them experienced difficulties to re-integrate themselves to their families upon their return from the Gulf States. Afroza was not welcomed by her husband because she failed to earn and save sufficient money, Sajeda's husband stigmatized her for having a loose lifestyle and refused to accept her. Salma lost her *shongshar* (family) as a consequence of her failed labour migration. Their cases mirror Blanchet et al (2002)'s findings. Blanchet et al (2002:23) show that Bangladeshi female international migrants, who return home empty handed, are 'left poorer and weaker than before'. But, Afroza and Salma's stories, do not support Blanchet et al's claim that foreign domestic workers give in to their employers' demands to keep their jobs. Both of them refused to compromise their *shamman* (honour) to keep their jobs. Only Lubna's case supports such claim. Lubna accepted to do *kharap kaaj* (bad work) to accrue the benefits of overseas employment and appear as a successful labour migrant. I argue, that if women need to compromise honour to get advantages of participation in paid work, it may lead to 'maldevelopment' (Shiva 1989) instead of ensuring sustainable development for them. Yet, given the diversity of women's international labour migration experiences, it is difficult to draw any hasty conclusion about the impact of paid work on women's lives.

### **Summary**

This article focuses on some poor women's experiences of work at brick kilns, garment factories and international domestic spaces. It also highlights the work of few upper middle class women, who migrate and accept paid employment at formal offices within and outside the country. I show that increasing participation of women in paid work has changed the notion of work from traditional home based to market oriented ones. Drawing on the differences of women's labour migration experiences, in this article, I question if it is possible to claim that women's participation in paid work always improves their status.

Highlighting the variation of women's experiences as garments workers and foreign domestic workers, I have shown, in this article, how poor migrant women's labour gets exploited by global capitalism. I have argued that commodification of women's labour allows owners of capital to accumulate wealth and maximise capitalist benefits. Because of increasing availability, capitalist markets consider women's labour as cheap and replaceable, which devalues women's work. Often, the profit making mentality of capitalism undervalues women's unpaid care work such as daily household work, child care and performance of other domestic responsibilities. Given existing gender role expectations, paid work, therefore, appear as a double burden for some

women. I emphasize that participation in paid work does not automatically lead to equal distribution of reproductive labour between sexes. Particularly, in the absence of women who undertake labour migration and leave their families behind, it is other women (specially members of extended family or hired labour) who perform household responsibilities including child care. I have argued that passing on women's roles to other female hands perpetuates gender inequality and supports conventional understanding of unpaid care work as women's work.

I do not, however, claim that women are always negatively affected by globalization and the paid employment opportunities that it creates for them. Rather, I emphasize that globalization's effects on women are not uniform but highly 'uneven' and 'inconsistent' (Siddiqi 2003:18). On one hand, it brings modernity in women's lives, helps them to become self-reliant, increases their agency and enable them to bargain with patriarchal authority. On the other hand, it intensifies their work load and makes them vulnerable to sexual harassments and verbal abuses. Based on the type of work they do as migrant labourers, work is, categorized by them as *shommanjonok kaaj* (respectful work), *bhalo kaaj* (good work) and *kharap kaaj* (bad work). However, women's distinction between *bhalo kaaj* and *kharap kaaj* is not straight forward and there are always trade-offs. As women have multiple realities, I propose that women's experiences of labour migration and its impact on their lives should be understood from women's standpoints.

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