

Temporary work migration in rural Bangladesh – improving livelihoods?

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Research location



The study

- ‘Social Protection By and For Temporary Work Migrants’ which focused on Bengali speaking temporary work migrants and their families from rural areas in Murshidabad in West Bengal and Gaibandha in North Western Bangladesh.
- The research, involving fieldwork with sending communities of migrants, explored how families left behind respond to the absence of the temporary worker and how migrants in their temporary workplaces and as they travel, cope with the risks and hazards they face.



Sample

- 20 households were selected for in-depth study.
 - We first took a census of the whole village (total of 444 households)
 - 83 households found to be actively involved in migration at the time of the study.
 - Study households chosen to represent different types of household, migration experience and wealth rank.



Formal social protection in the village

- Six NGOs had active programmes in the village.
 - BRAC, ASA, Grameen Bank, Samokal and TMSS provided micro-credit.
- Government support available through Vulnerable Group Development cards (VGD), Vulnerable Group Fund cards (VGF), old age allowances and relief for crisis periods

Gender and migration

- The majority of migrants were men -- few female migrants in the village.
- Four women had migrated in the past.
- Three women (including two in case study households) were present migrants at the time of the study.
 - Most of those who were left at home to manage the family were women.



Occupations of migrants

- Agricultural workers
- Rickshaw and van pullers
- Carpenters
- Housemaids
- Beggars

Destinations (and distance)

- Agricultural workers migrate to Bogra, Comilla, Dinajpur and Feni (50-250km away).
- Rickshaw pullers migrate to Dhaka, Feni and Rangpur (100-250km away).
- Carpenters, to the nearby district although some go to Dhaka (up to 100km away).
- Housemaids (the two women) go to Feni (250km away).



Variation in livelihood outcomes

- Carpenters and some of the rickshaw pullers seemed to be able to make a reasonable living.
- Agricultural labourers struggled to make a decent wage.
 - Agricultural labourers only migrated for a few months a year.
 - Majority of rickshaw pullers were away most of the year.

Perceptions of migration in the village

- *“Migration is bad, because one cannot keep his prestige intact, if he works as a labourer outside his village. Sometimes lower class people migrate under the compulsion of earning, and then it is tolerable and can be accepted. But those middle class persons, if they migrate, people do not like that and tell bad things about them everywhere, if not in front of them. Those who are poor can migrate because of scarcity but even so they must keep their prestige up.”*
(comment made during a group discussion)



Sustaining the family while the migrant was away

- Maintaining good relationships with neighbours and family;
- Taking on additional work to maintain animals and crops;
 - Caring for cattle
 - Tending crops, including work on fields away from the homestead.
- Stretching the available food and money.

Scarcity of food and money

- *At present there is scarcity of food at Ajjij's home. His wife cannot get a further loan for buying food and on the other side; lenders are continuously giving her pressure for repayment of loans she had taken already. Under such circumstances, she wanted to inform Ajjij over the mobile phone. However, she does not have money for paying the mobile phone charge. She went to the mobile phone shop in the village to phone on credit. However, she was not allowed to use the phone.*

Loan repayment

- Families left behind can face pressure to repay money or goods that have been borrowed from individuals or NGOs;
 - While the membership of multiple NGOs may provide access to different funds, allowing a family to borrow from one to pay off the other, the need to keep up the payments can be a considerable burden.

Conclusion

- When we asked why he migrated one man told us that `migration helps one to take regular meals and improve one's dwelling house'.
 - That is the case for those who are successful
- Lack of alternative sources of employment for those with little land and few other assets so temporary work migration will continue to be an important part of livelihoods despite the hardships some families and migrants face.



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