

CHILDREN'S MIGRATION FOR WORK IN BANGLADESH:

A VALUE-LADEN AND POLICED SYMBOL OF HONOUR AND
BELONGING

Presentation for:

**Children on the Move in the Developing World: Sharing
Research Findings**

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Background



- My thesis concerns choice and decision-making in children's migration for work
- Migration for work is still seen as an **adult** phenomenon:
 - ▣ Children who migrate without their parents are largely seen as **not** having choice because of poverty, because they are '**victims**' of harmful social practices and/or due to a *breakdown* in values
- Many of these assumptions have been **disputed**, however; they **persist**
 - ▣ research about 'childhood' has tended to be constituted "as a narrow empirical field outside and adrift from general social theory and analysis" (Alanen and Mayall, 2001)

Methodology



- Ethnographic fieldwork in 4 villages in Madhupur upazila, Tangail zila (district), Bangladesh (origin) and destination (industrial sites around Dhaka, Savar, Gazipur)
- Collective and individual methods (including; discussions, interviews, observation, and life histories)
- Using purposive and snowball sampling, I found 58 child migrants (35 girls and 23 boys); and engaged with another 73 parents, neighbours, friends and peers
- In my fieldsites, children's migration for work is the **exception** and not the **norm**



This suggests...



- Poverty is not the only factor driving 'choice' in children's migration for work

and,

- It provides scope to explore how boundaries and thresholds are pushed as children transition through the life course

Why do so few leave?

Poverty?

Schooling?

Marriage?



because of values, notably:

Honour and Shame

Concerning **boys**:



- paid work is available locally so, **unless** they are well-educated (and ashamed) to do the local work; and/or want adventure; and/or want better paying work, **most stay**

Concerning **girls**:



- migration for work is largely considered **bad** and shameful and girls who do it are considered **bad** so very few have any interest to go even if they could do with the money

Being 'honourable' overrides economic imperatives



Rushnan is one of the poorest women I met. Her husband left her and their four children when he remarried over 10 years-ago. He occasionally visits and rarely provides her with any financial support. When he left, she found a job doing road construction with other poor women in other parts of the country. Rushnan also sent her two eldest daughters out to do domestic work. Her son was sent to work at a tea-stall in town and her youngest child, a daughter, was left for her husband to look after. Despite needing to earn money and liking her job Rushnan had to return to the village prematurely because her daughters were 'marriage age' and people in the village were saying that it was bad that they were outside working and that she should instead be at home arranging their marriages. Rushnan didn't like being talked about so she returned and arranged two of the girls' marriages even though, according to her, they were both still very young.

Elements of 'honour'

- Listening to and obeying parents
- Respecting elders
- If working, giving your income to your parents
- Wearing clothes appropriate to your gender, age and class
- Showing hospitality
- Not swearing
- Parents must take care of their children, provide them with food and clothes, educate them, arrange their daughters' marriages
- Around **puberty**, girls and boys cannot mix with each other
- Moving far around or outside is not good for girls (especially around and after puberty)
- Moving far outside and late at night is not good for boys

the elements...(continued)

- vary between villages: one village had the most conservative views about girls' mobility, migration and work
- vary in strength by gender and generation
- concern one's position in the household and community and outline responsibilities and claims to each other
- honour has **individual** and **collective** dimensions (Dodd 1973)
- honour shapes and guides choice and decision-making

Learning honour and shame



- the rules are taught to children and reinforced from a very young age
- when young, breaking the rules is treated lightheartedly
- **yet**, when girls and boys approach puberty, how they relate to each other involves a deliberate process of learning and regulation

Puberty and *honour*

- For **girls** especially, puberty marks a **key** and potentially **risky** moment for their honour: they do not want to be seen violating *purdah* (female seclusion):
- Boys learn *slightly* later than girls and they too must abide by notions of *purdah* however they have fewer constraints than girls
- *Purdah* puts significant constraints on adolescent girls and boys' interactions and choices, but there are other dimensions...

Demographic composition and *honour*

- The demographic profile of the neighbourhood, especially the age and composition of one's friends can mean *earlier* transitions:

Mariam (16 years-old):

For a girl, wearing trousers is shameful; you have to wear salwar kameez. I started wearing salwar kameez when I was seven or eight years-old and my parents made me wear it. This made me happy because all my friends were wearing salwar kameez before me. I liked wearing it and thought that if I wear a salwar kameez I will be beautiful. My friends, Zafrin, Razia, Beauty, Sadia, Saira and Poppy started wearing salwar kameez earlier and it made me embarrassed and they made fun of me for not wearing one until later. My friends are older than me and they developed physically before me. If my friends had been younger than me I would have started wearing a salwar kameez later. Honour is about how you dress, you must dress properly. But, it is also about your actions.

Class and *honour*

- Being wealthier brings about greater restrictions on social and economic life, especially if you are a **girl**:

Nargis (19 years-old):

Honour isn't as hard to violate if you are poorer and female. It is more difficult for wealthier people to maintain honour than for poor people. I belong to the category of being wealthier so there are more restrictions on what I can do. Poor people have to work so they do whatever work they can get and people don't say anything bad about them. But, if you are wealthier, you have fewer choices, especially if you are a girl. We are not very poor. We are a little wealthy. If we work everyone will say "They [Nargis' family] have everything but they still work." When poor people work nobody says anything about them.

Honour and labour markets

If you are in the village and have no earning source boys can work but if girls do road repair or agricultural work, people say bad things so they can't [work] because it is not good.

- Girls' engagement in paid work upsets what is seen as being a role and responsibility of males
- The consequences of being 'bad' are serious and of longer-term duration for girls than boys.
- Garments' work has more status than domestic work. Girls who do domestic work are less likely to talk about it.

Nasir doesn't drive a rickshaw in the village because he is ashamed but in Dhaka there is no shame because no one knows him...[When] he is in Dhaka, village people think he does chakri but if he drives a rickshaw in the village everyone calls him rickshaw wallah ['rickshaw driver'].

- Boys may migrate to avoid engagement in locally available 'low' status work so as to preserve their honour

'Policing' *honour* and self-policing

- Gossips police honour and shame and ensure conformity of members to it
- They police behaviours seen as appropriate for one's gender, position in the life course and class
- Gender is increasingly policed as children develop (especially girls)
- Older women are the most powerful and prolific gossips
- Fear of being talked about leads to self-policing
- Girls more likely to self-police than boys and this includes stopping work
- Children are therefore *embedded* in values and social relations (Hashim 2005) from young, gendered thresholds

Bending and Questioning *the rules*

Children create spaces to bend and question the rules and do so on a daily basis

Ongoing social and economic change also creates tension and contradiction


Change and maintaining *honour*

Co-educational schools

- Mixing of adolescent girls and boys is considered shameful, yet is a policy practiced in schools
- Leads to inter-generational tension:
 - Ok to have 'boy' friends *in* school but **not** outside

'New' tradition of dowry

- Emergence and rise of dowry creates anxieties and tensions for parents to come up with the money required
- Although it is seen as shameful, it can lead to girls' migration for work because it is socially unacceptable for girls **not** to pay dowry and **not** to get married

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- Social and economic change may encourage migrant working girls and their parents to challenge and contest conservative interpretations of religious tenets, including *purdah*:

Sohel (father of two working girls):

I know people say it is not good that girls work outside and that girls and boys mix. God never said that girls cannot work outside and that males and females cannot mix. Some things that were okay a long time ago are not applicable today.

Migration, symbolic of freedom?

- Outside the villages a space is created for **more** flexible and individual interpretation of values

My discussion with **Alamgir (16 years-old)**:

When you go for 'freedom' in the city do you still think about and maintain honour?

A little bit.

So, are you good or bad when you go to the city?

One time I was good, one time I was naughty when I went.

Migration is a symbol of *belonging*

- However, when they are outside working, most boys and girls *still* self-police and adhere to honour
- In addition, features of rural life are ‘migrated’ to urban settings:

My discussion with **Fatema (19 years-old)**:

When you were in Dhaka working and at that time unmarried, you were on your own; your father and mother weren't there and you could do what you wanted and no one would know.

No actually in Dhaka there are lots of people from Tangail [Madhupur is part of Tangail zila or district] so you are not unknown. So you must maintain the honour of your father. Other people are there and see you if you do something and people will say, “The girl has become bad in Dhaka.” Moreover, when you go to Dhaka unknown people also become known to you and they can also say bad things about you. A foreign girl like you can do anything she wants: she can go wherever she wants but a Bangali Muslim girl cannot. She has to maintain society's rules and this is honour. If girls don't wear their clothes properly, if on the road they talk to boys or if they love boys then their honour will be spoiled.

Honour is policed in the constrained space

- Migrant children police others; albeit there is more **flexibility** in interpretation of *honour*
 - ▣ Friendship may offer a form of protection from being gossiped about

- Not only do they invite condemnation (through gossip) but also **envy**
 - ▣ Jealousy is a means by which those 'talked about' challenge the gossips

Limits: crossing boundaries in the constrained space

- The passage of time and established precedents may offer *protection* from being the subject of gossip
- However, there are limits: if one stays away too long or makes the ‘wrong’ decisions, your membership in the community may be severed, though **not** to your household:

The case of Sadia (21 years-old) and Saira (19 years-old):

While working in garments, and against their parents’ will, both sisters married men whom they met while working outside. Their husbands’ families never accepted them, even after both had children with their sons. As of January 2008, Saira had been tricked into divorcing her husband and Sadia’s husband had left and she vowed not to return to him. Both girls told me they could not return to their village.

Their younger sister Poppy (16 years-old) explained to me why they could not return home and what would happen if they did:

Everyone will say the two girls are married but none of them can live with their husband. Everybody will say that it is my sisters’ fault [that they are now single]. Also, we don’t have our own land. We have to stay on others’ land that is why we have to listen to what other people say.

Conclusions:



- Children's migration for work is **not** singularly economic-driven, nor is it about individual and independent motives, nor is it about a breakdown in values
- It is, in fact, a value-laden process involving honour and avoiding shame; being a vital member of social and economic life and playing by the rules
- Honour is an over-arching structure that shapes the (highly constrained) agency of children, yet to fully comprehend 'choice' and 'decision-making' need to examine the **household**, the **key site** where choices/decisions are shaped and made