# Research Report

# Time to Look at Girls: Adolescent Girls' Migration in Bangladesh

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May 2016

swiss network for international studies

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## Acknowledgements

I am pleased to acknowledge the support given to this research project by a number of funders and partners. This research has been carried out under the umbrella of the Global Migration Centre of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland through the funding provided by the Swiss Network for International Studies (SNIS) and additionally by Vrije University, Amsterdam, The Girl Effect Ethiopia, the University of Sussex, Terre des Hommes.

I have to thank Valentina Lucchese and Manuela D'Andrea together with the staff of Terre des Hommes Italy in Bangladesh, ARBAN (Association for the Realization of Basic Right), Aparajeyo Bangladesh, RMMRU (Refugee and Migratory Movement Unit) at the University of Dhaka and ZXY International for their valuable support during the field-work.

Special thanks go to the migrant and non-migrant young women who have been part of the project in different capacities. In particular, I want to acknowledge the hard work and effort of the members of the research team who made the field-work an enjoyable and unforgettable experience. Bushra Mahmuda, Kakoli Shaha, Ushree Barua, Rupa Mollick, Khadeja, Bably Akter, Mim Akter, Hazera Akter, Eity Yeasmin and Rokunuzzaman, Thank You!!

Finally, I have to thank my colleagues Dr. Katarzyna Grabska, Dr. Marina de Regt and Prof. Ann Whitehead for their support, inspiration and intellectual exchange that have made the whole project possible and highly enjoyable from start to end.

## Summary: Key Findings

### Background of the study

The Swiss Network of International Studies (SNIS)-funded research "**Time to Look at Girls: Adolescent Girls' Migration and Development"** explored the links between migration of adolescent girls and development in the Global South through a holistic approach that contextualises adolescents' and young women's agency, choices and migration experiences. This mixed-method and multi-sited research focused on adolescent girls who migrate internally and internationally from Bangladesh and Ethiopia and to Sudan. The fieldwork in Bangladesh took place between January 2014 and December 2015 among Bangladeshi adolescent girls and young women migrants. It was carried out by Dr Del Franco Nicoletta supported by a research team composed of one research assistant, two professionals working for local NGOs and five adolescent girls who were recruited among the inhabitants of the two slum areas where the research took place.

### Key findings

*Reasons for migration and the decision to migrate*

Most of the migrants we interviewed come for vulnerable household that, at the time of their migration lacked economic and social resources. In the case of the Garo we found 6 (out of 13) households that the respondents defined as '*majhari*' (in the middle) and only 2 (out of 47) in the Bengali group. From the answers to the questionnaire and the life stories it appears clearly how the decision to migrate and the process of decision-making are the result of many interrelated factors with poverty, defined by the respondents as '*obhab*' (literally lack) playing pivotal role in most of the cases. In most severe cases a situation of economic need was connected with the death or illness of the family breadwinner, the lack of support from brothers, some environmental disaster or a sudden emergency.

Some girls moved to Dhaka to escape difficult family situations: they did not get along with a step mother or step father, felt uncared for or were mistreated. Only a few claimed that they wanted to gain some freedom, do something for themselves and/or avoid to be married early. Five girls who mentioned the failure of their marriage among the reasons for their migration share similar experiences. They married at a very young age between 12 and 14 and got divorced or separated after realizing that their husband was married already or because of abuse and mistreatment by husband and in-laws.

It is noticeable that all those (4) who migrated with the intention of continuing their studies were Garo. They were all hoping that they would be able to work and study at the same time but only one of them has had the opportunity to do so, probably favoured by the fact that the owner of the parlour where she works part-time is a Garo herself and a far-relative of her.

By listening to girls' migration stories we understand not just the multiplicity of circumstances behind their migration but also the complexity of the situation in which the decision to migrate maturates. This is in most cases generated by a lack of alternatives, but at the same time it comes after a conscious evaluation of different possibilities and as a response to a chance. Girls do not perceive their choice as a forced one. By saying ' *I had to leave*' they want to stress how they felt responsible for their families and that they wanted to contribute to their livelihood. Some of them willingly gave up they studies to look for work. Others expressed hope in a better future and the awareness that migration would have opened for them and their families more opportunities.

*Migration trajectories*

Putting together the quantitative and qualitative data suggests that for the majority of Bengali adolescent rural to urban migrants, migration to work in Dhaka is not a long-term life choice. Many girls, who have moved to Dhaka at an early age, sometimes following older sisters, settle for 1 or 2 years of work in Dhaka. Yet many also return to their place of origin within a few months. Others stay longer but after a few years, as a result of the difficult work conditions, deteriorating health, or to get married when their parents find a suitable match, also return to their home communities. The few respondents who spend longer in the city, may after some years of work and/or after marriage and a consequent improvement in their economic situation, move to a different area of the city. Some girls migrate internationally, and many aspire to do so, but this research has no information on the longer-term trajectories of these migrants. The trajectory is quite different for the Garo migrants. Many had migrated to Dhaka long time ago and have married and settled there.

*Being an adolescent in an urban slum*

Most of the Bengali girls live in slum areas and experience problems in terms of clean water, toilet facilities, and cooking facilities. For many of them, health worsened after migration. They usually spend their time between 'office' as they call the factory, and their room in the slum, due to the long working hours and the lack of free time, and lack of money for entertainment. The Garo girls were disappointed that once in Dhaka they could not fulfil their objective of funding their studies through working. Especially the newly arrived felt like 'prisoners' in the parlour hostels.

Living in Dhaka, potentially provides more opportunities for girls to develop a network of female and male friends, than living in a village. This is facilitated by working side by side in the factory, by the lack of parental control and the use of mobile phones. However, when it comes to relationships with boys and men the fear of losing one's reputation with behaviours contrary to the recognised social norms is significant. Girls are afraid of or have experienced being cheated by young and older suitors. Some were married by men to gain some sort of economic advantage, while claiming to be 'in love'. Moreover, being far away from their place of origin and not having the protection of an older 'guardian', girls are more vulnerable to eve-teasing, violence and abuse than girls who are born in the slum and live with their parents and male siblings. As a result most of the migrant girls do not take advantage of the opportunities that the city might offer, tend to keep a very restrained attitude and claim that they will get married back in their village only when their parents arrange it. Those who step out of the social norms risk incurring harsh sanctions (extortion, forced marriages) by local gangs of youngsters who are linked to locally powerful people and/or risk being trafficked into brothels in Bangladesh and abroad.

*Marriage and migration*

The research points to diverse situations for Bengali girls. **One,** migration *can contribute to postpone marriage*: those who had never married declared that they expected to return home in the space of a few years and marry. Some of them claimed that if they hadn't migrated they would have probably been already married. The research indicates that migration for work in the capital may constitute for poor parents a possible alternative to marrying their daughters in their early teens. **Two,** *a failed marriage* together with the lack of economic resources of the family of origin is among *the triggers of migration for young women.* A divorce/separation brings shame and damages the reputation of the girl and of the girl' s family and diminishes the chances of a second marriage in the same area. Migration is a means of escaping the social stigma, increases the probability of remarrying for the girl (by starting afresh and pretending to be unmarried at destination) and transforms the girl into

an asset rather than a liability for the family of origin. **Three,** some migrants marry after migration with someone they meet at destination. These marriages are usually labelled as 'love marriages' because the bride and the groom, rather than their parents/relatives, took the initiative in arranging the marriage. Only a few cases were found among the Bengali migrants, all successful so far except for one. In these cases the migrant girl settles in Dhaka or where the in-laws reside.

All the Garo married migrants had instead married after migrating with men they met at destination or with old boyfriends. Norms about marriage and premarital relationship profoundly differentiate the two communities. Among the Garo marriage happens later, commonly after a period of 'engagement' during which the couple can spend time together and it is not necessarily arranged by parents.

*Perceived Positive Impacts Of Migration*

The majority of Bengali and all the Garo migrants claimed that their overall living and working conditions had improved with migration. Earning a salary was quoted as the main source of improvement. About two thirds of the migrants underlined that migration and work had a positive impact on their sense of self-hood and self-esteem, that their mobility has increased, that they have more decision making power in their daily life. Especially those who migrated at an early age and earn a higher income felt entitled to have a greater say in decision-making concerning their own and their family members' lives. Even the youngest migrants claimed that with migration they have become more 'clever', capable to stand on their own feet and to manage their daily lives. Those who married at destination identify marriage and having children as having a positive impact on their personal situation.

In areas where migration for garment work affects a great number of families, it is becoming more socially acceptable than in the past for girls to migrate independently. Migrant working girls are regarded as an important resource for their households. The migrants associated an improvement in the economic situation of their family with an increased capacity to cover basic daily expenses and health emergencies. For Garo migrants, long-term migration has visibly changed the villages of origin. In some of them every household has one or more members who have migrated either to Dhaka or to other towns and the flow of remittances has been substantial. Brick houses have been built in the villages with only the elderly residing there for most of the year.

*Particular vulnerabilities of migrant girls*

Migrants and the non-migrant Bengali girls share the same constraints in terms of mobility, possibility of cross-gender interaction, the same risks in terms of physical and sexual violence and ultimately the same social sanctions when and if they do not conform to the social norms that regulate the transition to adulthood, sexuality and marriage. While this is true for all adolescent girls, the research uncovered many difficult experiences that suggest that migrant adolescents are more vulnerable than their non-migrant counterpart in many respects: they are new to the city and the slums and in most cases they lack the protective support of familial networks. They are sometimes fleeing difficult circumstances in their home communities.

Of particular concern is that the respondents in our study had very little access to any forms of services and formally provided support. They had little idea of where they might go for help and indeed little is available. Because of their age, their working status, and their rapidly changing circumstances, they do not normally fall within the categories of beneficiaries targeted by state and non-state actors' interventions.

Being an adolescent migrant in Dhaka means lacking the support of familial networks and a shift from being a 'daughter' to becoming the adult who supports and is responsible for the well-being of one's parents and siblings. While some girls can count on the help of siblings who migrated before or after them and some others manage to make new friends at the work place or in the slum, most of the migrants we talked to felt quite isolated and appreciated the possibility we gave them to share with us some of their experiences.

What has been described in this section does not concern the Garo migrants. They usually count on a wider network of relatives and family members who reside in Dhaka. The Catholic and Protestant Church and some missionary congregations active in the capital and in the area of origin of the Garo migrants constitute an important source of social security for the Garo migrants, besides providing employment opportunities.

**Key implications for policy and intervention**

*Safer migration*
Adolescent girls' migration is not just the result of push and pull factors, but rather an expression of agency and a complex choice, motivated also for example by a desire to improve one' s life. Thus it is important to focus on what could be done to ensure a safer migratory experience for adolescents as well as a safer transition to adulthood.

*Safe spaces and wider social networks*
Emotional and social needs of girls can be met the creation of physical and social spaces for adolescents and young people to meet, share their experiences, practice different recreational activities, as well as receive basic life-skills training and meet mentors.

*Promoting discussion and challenging stereotypes about gender, sexuality and sexual violence*
Awareness raising activities, action research and other initiatives are needed to work with mixed gender groups, boys and men, community leaders, parents and social workers on issues related to gender relations and gender violence, marriage, sexuality in order to bring to discussion themes and issues otherwise considered beyond scrutiny and relegated to an untouchable realm of '*culture*'.

*Improving access to services for migrant girls*

- Strengthening existing interventions targeting adolescent girls and making them more inclusive; one easy measure in this respect would be to extend service providers and NGOs offices' opening times to Fridays and evenings so that migrant working girls can access them.
- Provide information on all the different services and facilities available in the area: including possibilities of schooling (for example Bangladesh Open University), basic skills training, health related facilities and on the presence in the area of residence of different kind of service providers like NGOs, Unions, microcredit groups.
- providing migrant girls counselling/mentoring to mitigate their sense of loneliness and isolation and psycho-social support especially in cases of girls at risks of abuse or victims of violence

# 1 Introduction

Between January 2014 and June 2016, the research project entitled "*Time to look at girls: Adolescent girls' migration*" was carried out in Bangladesh, Sudan and Ethiopia. The project was funded by the Swiss Network for International Studies (SNIS) and was implemented under the umbrella of the Global Migration Centre of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland. The Bangladesh case study has been carried out in partnership with RMMRU, with the logistic and administrative support of Terre des Hommes Italy Bangladesh Country Office and the collaboration of ARBAN (Association for the Realization of Basic Needs) and Aparajeyo Bangladesh (AB). Additionally, the project has been supported by Terre des Hommes, the University of Sussex in the United Kingdom, Feminist Review Trust and ZXY International.

The comparative research project focuses on the experiences, life choices and aspirations of adolescent girls and young women who migrate without their families or guardians, either internally and internationally in and from Bangladesh and Ethiopia and to Sudan. By considering different geographical realities, the research explored variations in the impact that migration has on the lives of migrant adolescent girls, on their families and communities, and the types of vulnerabilities and opportunities that migrant girls experience. The research fills an existing gap in knowledge about the reasons adolescent girls migrate and their aspirations and experiences. It provides insights into their agency and capacity to choose, their future opportunities, as well as constraints and how these are shaped contextually. The project feeds into the global campaign "Destination Unknown" recently launched by Terre des Hommes (TDH) who is a project partner. The research contributes to global policy debates by producing policy relevant analysis, data and recommendations.

In the past decade the number of children that are leaving their places of origin in search of better livelihoods is increasing rapidly. The large majority of these children are adolescents, and many of these adolescent migrants are girls (see Termin et al 2013). In the literature on migration and development the migration of children and adolescents is mainly described in the context of trafficking and exploitation. The focus on exploited and abused child migrants in international advocacy has made it difficult to recognise and address the needs of other migrating children. A number of studies (see for example Whitehead, Hashim, Iversen 2007; Jacquemin 2009; Hashim and Thorsen 2011) have criticized this approach, by showing that early migration is often children's and adolescents' own decision and that their reasons for migrating are often very similar to those of 20-25 year old. In the past five years an increasing body of literature has been published that pays attention to the agency of children (see for example Huijsmans 2011), yet few of these more nuanced accounts have included the experiences of adolescent girl migrants. They are invisible in both quantitative and qualitative studies. Exceptions are a number of studies on domestic workers and sex workers in Africa and Asia (see for example Erulkar 2006; Camacho 2006; Erulkar and Mekbib 2007; Jacquemin 2009; Klocker 2007; Van Blerk 2008; Guo, Chow and Palinka 2011).

Migration is predominantly a youthful activity.[1] It is these young migrants who are responsible for the much-valued remittances and who, optimists hope, will themselves benefit. The age of young migrants is critical because once they include adolescents and especially those who are legally children, the policy and popular discourse undergoes a

[1] Demographic data has shown that in most developing countries the peak ages of migration are the early and mid-20s (Temin et al 2013).

marked shift. The independent movements of under 18's are described very negatively as trafficking and exploitation. The focus on exploited and abused child migrants in international advocacy has made it difficult to recognise and address the needs of other migrating children. A number of studies (see for example Whitehead, Hashim, Iversen 2007; Jacquemin 2009; Hashim and Thorsen 2011) have criticized this approach, by showing that early migration is often children's and adolescents' own decision and that their reasons for migrating are often very similar to those of 20-25 year old.

In the past five years an increasing body of literature has been published that pays attention to the agency of children (see for example Huijsmans 2011; Hashim and Thorsen 2011). Few of the more nuanced accounts of children and young people's motivations and evaluations of migration have included the experiences of adolescent girl migrants. They are invisible in both quantitative and qualitative studies.[2] The few existing academic studies are mainly of domestic workers in Africa (Erulkar 2006; Erulkar and Mekbib 2007) and Southeast Asia (Camacho 2006; Guo, Chow and Palinka 2011) or occasionally of sex workers (Van Blerk 2008). A few studies in West Africa have taken a more rounded view (Jacquemin 2009, 2011; Hertrich and Lesclinglang 2012). Yet most regions of the world report that the rates of adolescent girls' migration both internally, within their regions and across the globe are growing (Temin et al 2013).

Our focus on 'adolescents' and adolescence stems from being this phase, between 11 to 20 years of age a crucial one in the individual life course; a period of critical transitions when major life decisions are taken, albeit in context specific ways (Bucholtz 2002; Del Franco 2012). The spatial shift implied in migration is one such critical transition that intersects with other choices that that are being made (Gardner and Osella 2003; Gardner 2009; Grabska 2010). This study will specifically explore the intersections of the migration decisions of young women with their decisions about education, work, sexual initiation, marriage and having children. These areas are also particularly relevant to assessing the potential development impacts of girls' migration.

### 1.1 Research questions

The research considered four broad sets of questions:

- The first one concerns **migration choices and trajectories**: what are the **reasons for the first migration and for the subsequent choices; what were the circumstances under which the decision to migrate has been taken?**
- The second concerns **young girls' life course transition/s:** how does migration as a spatial shift intersect with other **transitions for adolescent girls** and in which ways does it affect their life trajectories in terms of: education, marriage, work, childbearing?
- The third set of questions concerns the **sources of migrant girls' vulnerability** as well as the **sources of support for the adolescent girl migrants**.
- The last set of questions concerns **the legal frameworks and policy** that shape adolescent girls' migration: How do **national and regional policies and projects** address the needs and priorities of these migrants?

[2] This point is emphatically made by the Population Council's report published in May 2013 (Temin et al 2013), which attempts as the first report of its kind to examine the social and economic drivers of internal migration for adolescent girls in development countries and the links between migration, risk and opportunity.

# 2 The context

## 2.1 Emerging 'adolescence' and new life trajectories for girls

The process of transition to adulthood varies cross-culturally and only in certain contexts is it conceptualized as a social life stage in its own right, i.e. adolescence, nevertheless everywhere adulthood has to be socially acquired. The ethnography of rural Bangladesh suggests that puberty is a recognised event in a person's development in the sense that it signals the onset of sexual awareness, but it does not carry the interpretation of being the starting point of a prolonged transition from childhood to adulthood i.e. adolescence. This was true especially for girls for whom puberty used to correspond to the immediate acquisition of adulthood in so far as marriage before or soon after it was a predominant reality. For boys becoming adult was connected with being married and economically capable to support their own family (Aziz & Maloney, 1985; Kotalova, 1993). The process of acquisition of adulthood, besides being strongly gendered and classed has been undergoing profound changes and we may say that 'adolescence' has been de facto emerging as a life stage both in rural and urban contexts with a temporal, social and spatial dimension. There has been an increase in the age of marriage for both boys and girls to which different factors have contributed. Since the early nineties, there has been a steady increase in the number of girls enrolled in secondary and higher secondary education both in rural and urban areas. The statistics show that since 2005 there were more girls than boys enrolled in grades 6-10 (BANBEIS 2006) and the same is true for the following years (BANBEIS 2014). The growth of girls' education implies that after puberty girls are not always inevitably married off. Their lives may follow different trajectories, in the interlinked educational and marriage careers depending to a great extent, although not exclusively, on the socio-economic background of their families. With the growth of the Ready Made Garment sector, migration from rural areas to industrial cities for work has become another of such trajectories; this report intends to analyse the way girls experience it and the other connected life choices, the kind of agency they can and do express and the modalities with which they assert themselves in the life choices they make.

We use the term adolescence and adolescents because adolescent years have been interpreted as a significant moment in the individual psycho-social development in relation to one's sense of self-hood and self-identity as well as a moment in which the individual redefines its social world by distancing him/herself from the kind of social relations that characterized childhood and by occupying wider social spaces. In Bangladesh this process of self-definition occurs in context of strong social embeddedness which means that there is scarce public recognition of the search for identity as it is conceptualized in accounts of adolescence in the West.

As research as shown (Del Franco 2012; Amin (ed), 2015), in Bangladesh especially among rural and urban poor, boys and girls are not encouraged to develop their own preferences and to take the initiative in marriage or work; rather the individual is expected to conform to parental and social expectations. This emphasis on commitments to family and to complex networks of social relationships cross-cuts class and gender and has profound implications for how young people experience and confront the process of transition to adulthood and the kind of agency they can express in their life choices. Intergenerational relationships are shaped by hierarchy and by status considerations that overall influence people's reciprocal attitude and behaviour as well as their choices. Keeping a respectable social position by keeping intact one's '*man shonman'* (prestige, honour) and by avoiding being given a '*durnam'* (bad reputation) is a priority for men and

for women because it is the condition for being recognized as a full member of the '*samaj'* (society or moral community) (Del Franco, 2012; Blanchet, 1996).

The issue of the role of the social in relation to individual identity has been the focus of considerable debate in the anthropological literature on South Asia. A '*paradigm of collectivity*' (Arnold and Blackburn 2004) dominated in South Asian scholarship in the field of anthropology, history, politics and religious studies in the 60s and the 70s. Indian society was represented as a socio-centric one where there was no space for consideration of notions of selfhood and individual identity, and where individual personality and interests were totally subsumed into the caste, familial and group identities.

However, counter to this 'culturalist' perspective more recent socio psychological studies that have focused on intra family dynamics in a South Asian context show that if we look at self and identity 'in action' through the words, experiences and behaviour of the actors, we see that identity as perceived, played out in interaction and lived in choices is far more complex and that than simply being shaped by discourses about the importance of the collective (Mines 1988; Kakar 1979; Wilce 1998) and that Indian women despite operating '*within a highly 'engaged' interpersonal network of family relationships and expectations'* that informs their own perceptions of their needs and wishes, are nonetheless capable of articulating and pursuing them (Ewing 1991:139).

The process of development of one's sense of selfhood and one's social identity takes place through the whole life of the individual, and adolescence can be seen as a phase where this process assumes a particular intensity. Adolescents are an unstable terrain to explore because they are engaged in a process of multiple personal and social transitions. This research discusses how migration, as a spatial shifts intersects with other transitions in the lives of adolescent girls.

### 2.2 Adolescence as a development issue: child marriage

In an early ethnography Aziz and Maloney (1985) listed and described life stages as they are conceptualized in Bangladesh as: *shisukal,* (infancy), *balyakal* (school age), *kaisorer prarambha* (pre-adolescence) *kaisor* (early adolescence) *nabajuban* (late adolescence) *purnajauban* (young adulthood) *madhyamkal* (middle age), *briddhakal* (old age), *maranka*l (literally time to die). These complex conceptualization does not correspond however to the way common people understand and talk about the life course both in rural and urban Bangladesh and the term *kisor-kisori* is rarely used to identify adolescents (Del Franco 2012, Blanchet 1996). When a girl reaches puberty people say that '*boyos hoece*' (she has come to age) and from that point onwards girls mobility is limited by the observance of *purdah,*[3] and adults and parents try to keep the occasions of interaction between boys and girls to the minimum. Adults view adolescence and youth hood as a problematic period; puberty onwards is commonly considered a phase of particularly strong emotionality. Young people, irrespective of gender, are considered to be *abeg probon* (prone to passion), even more so than adults. They are said to be exceptionally *gorom* (hot), to have hot blood[4]

[3] Purdah, which literally means curtain, has not to be understood only in the limited meaning of the physical seclusion of women inside the house. Both for Hindu and Muslims purdah entails an ideal of modesty enforced through '*prohibition on movement, gesture, speech and association and the development of feminine characteristics like virtue and* shame' (Ahmed 1993:60). Papanek argues that *purdah* operates through two different principles: '*separate worlds*' and provision of '*symbolic shelter*' (Papanek 1982:6). The first is mostly related to the division of labour and a series of rules regarding the use of space. The second underlines the tension between the private domain pertaining to women and the outside world.

[4] Osella and Osella (2002:119) notice that bodily heat and strong sexual desire are, in Kerala, an attribute of both young males and females, in contrast to what appears from other anthropological sources, where women are depicted as more prone to it.

and this is deemed to depend on their sexual maturation. The word *probon* can also be translated as 'addicted' and the expression *abeg probon* conveys also a sense of weakness, dependency and incapacity of control. Every form of cross-gender interaction before marriage is considered very dangerous because of the strong force of young people's sexuality and every kind of interaction between boys and girls is easily labelled as having a sexual connotation, and as such being illicit. Parent's fear that their daughters may loose chastity or acquire a bad reputation and loose their honour by engaging in premarital relationships, is one of the reasons why parents tends to arrange their daughters' marriage as soon as possible. In-fact despite the increase over the years of the age at marriage for girls, marriage before the legal age of 18 is still a common reality especially both in rural and urban contexts (Amin, 2015). According to UNICEF Bangladesh 66% of girls are married before 18 and about 33% are married before 15. (UNICEF, 2008 http://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/children_4866.htm).

Policy and development interventions have thus been targeting adolescent unmarried girls mainly in connection to and as possible 'victims' of child marriage. Most of these interventions are framed in the language of human rights and identify the spreading of secondary education as the main tool to postpone girls' marriage and tackle its negative consequences: early child bearing and the consequent risks for mother and child's health, domestic violence and the generational transmission of poverty. Some projects also try to postpone girls' marriage by providing opportunities for training and involvement in income generating activities.

The Population Council Bangladesh has been running a project called BALIKA (Bangladeshi Association for Life Skills, Income, and Knowledge for Adolescents) to evaluate the effectiveness of different approaches to prevent child marriage. There are several components of the programme. One, through education support girls received tutoring in mathematics and English (in-school girls) and computing or financial skill training (out-of-school girls). Two, in life-skills trainings girls received training on gender rights and negotiation, critical thinking and decision-making. Three, in livelihoods training, girls received training entrepreneurship, mobile phone servicing, photography and basic first aid. Interestingly all the activities included in the skill building approaches have been conducted in girls-only locations, so called BALIKA centres.

In a similar line the 'Kishori Abhijan' (literally 'adolescent journey') project is another example of a comprehensive attempt to postpone marriage for girls and promote 'girls' empowerment'. A pilot phase of the Kishori Abhijan was run from 2001 to 2005 and a second phase, funded by the European Union Delegation to Bangladesh, from 2006 to 2011. The project was jointly implemented by UNICEF Bangladesh and the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA) and by some local NGOs, with two main objectives: '*to empower adolescents, especially girls, to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect their lives (including education, livelihood strategies and increasing age at marriage) and to become active agents of social change* and *-to create and sustain a supportive environment for adolescent girl development at the household and community level'* (Sood et Shuaib 2011: iv).
The end-line report of the project discusses the positive changes brought about by it, measured mainly in terms of increased knowledge by the participants of issues like: reproductive health, the dangers of child marriage, the legal norms about it and in terms of the number of participants who received training on and were involved in income generation activities. Yet, according to the qualitative interviews to the participants at the end of the project: '*by and large parents felt that the project was a waste of time. Adolescent they felt would be better off focusing on their education or finding jobs to make money. Parents were also apprehensive about letting adolescent girls interacting with boys of their age. They feared for their*

*reputation*' (Sood et Shuaib 2011: xxx) The evaluation also found that the majority of the participants to the project had a good level of knowledge of how harmful dowry and child marriage can be but that '*at the more practical level change is hard to implement*' (ibidem: xxx). In the conclusive chapter the end line report acknowledges that '*despite some positive changes in gender norms and attitudes, there is still rampant gender discrimination*' and that participation in the project is '*by no means a panacea for traditional social and community nor*ms' (ibidem: 474).

Somehow these findings resonate with other research that shows the strength of the dominant view of sexuality, honour and gender relations that I have briefly described above and the difficulty of addressing these strong cultural counters through 'development' interventions. In-fact there are issues that cannot be questioned and barriers in the face of which the development discourse and practices have to step back. People refer frequently to '*amader (our) culture*' as an ultimate explanation for attitudes, behaviours and choices related to sexuality and marriage. Including some issues into '*amader culture*' means that they cannot be objects of discussion and that they have to be taken for granted.

By looking at girls who have migrated from rural areas to Dhaka in their adolescent years, this research also looks at the extent to which the participants to this study have been involved in their areas of origin and/or at destination in programs or interventions targeted at adolescent girls and in which way their experiences as migrants and the shift for a rural to an urban reality are influenced and influence their experiences as adolescents.

### 2.3 Women's migration: international and internal migration flows

Migration is a major feature of Bangladesh's recent and less recent history, with many citizens today migrating internally from rural to urban areas, and internationally. Although this is mainly to the Middle East and South East Asia, countries such as the US, the UK and lately Italy are significant minority destinations.

Migration to the USA, Canada and Australia and the UK in Europe is characterized by being long term and permanent. The latter started in the nineteenth century from the district of Syleth and its history and characteristics distinguish it from the contemporary migration to other European countries (Gardner 2009). From the 1970s, after Western countries adopted more restrictive immigration policies, Bangladeshi workers started moving to the Middle East and South East Asia for short-term labor contracts. Short-term migrants from Bangladesh are predominantly men between the ages of 20 and 25, but the percentage of women has been increasing. In 2002, women workers constituted 0.54 per cent of the total number of Bangladeshi workers who migrated overseas in that year, by the middle of 2013 the percentage stood at 13 per cent (ILO 2014). Lebanon has been the top choice for migrant women workers between 1991 and June 2013, followed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Mauritius, Oman, Kuwait, and Malaysia. Women migrate to be employed as domestics, housekeepers, nurses, and garment workers (ILO 2014). They go mainly on short-term contracts through agencies and, in some cases, according to quotas decided by the Government, on the basis of international agreements with the destination countries. International women's migration is subject to strict laws and regulations so that formally only women older than 25 can obtain the necessary authorizations from the Government for regular migration. Younger women also migrate irregularly across the border to India, especially from the South

Western districts of Jessore and Khulna.

When it is a household choice women's migration is preferred to men's because it tends to be less expensive: agency fees are lower and the government subsidizes the journey. Two FGDs conducted with prospective female migrants to Lebanon in the course of this study found that all the women were in their 20s, both married or divorced, and all were migrating internationally directly from rural areas. However, this is not always the case: in the slums of Dhaka, where this research was conducted, we found cases of adolescent migrants from rural areas, who after a period of work in Dhaka, decided to move on to the Middle East. The requirement of the age limit can be easily manipulated by some adolescents who declare themselves to be older than they are so as to move to the Middle East.

Internal migration has been on the rise, linked to the expansion of the manufacturing sector in more urban areas and to the gradual worsening of livelihood options in rural areas. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, the urbanization rate as a correlate of internal rural- urban migration has been 3.03% from 1975 to 2009, one of the highest in the world. From 1980 to 2010 agricultural production dropped from 32% to 19% as a share of GDP and the share of industrial production rose from 21% to 28% (UNDP 2013). The high proportion of landless households chasing lowly paid agricultural work, together with increasing land scarcity and poor returns to farming push rural people to look for work elsewhere. These vulnerabilities are exacerbated by riverbank erosion and seasonal flooding in the South West, or conversely drought in the North East. The number of migrant women and girls is also on the rise and the increasing demand for female workers in the Ready Made Garment sector (RMG) is an important factor here. According to Ahmed (2009) there were about 1.7 million women employed in the sector in 2009, with 60% of them under 25 (Hossain 2012).

Moving to Dhaka for garment work is not the only migratory path open to Bengali girls. Another major trajectory is to migrate from rural areas to Dhaka and other district towns to work as domestics. One of our respondent argued that it is usually younger girls and older women who works as maids, if they are too young to be employed in factories, or too old to be able to bear with the long working hours in garment factories. A recent survey (ILO 2006) reveals that there are about 2 million domestic workers in Bangladesh and that 400,000 of them are children aged 14 and under. Twenty-three per cent of these start working at ages below 8 years, 33% at age 9-11 years and 33% at age 12-14. Girls are the majority: 78%.

According to Phulki, an NGO that works with domestic and garment workers, at puberty some of the young girls that migrated to Dhaka to work return to their villages to get married, but some others move on to work in the garment industry. According to Hossain (2012) the average length of time women do this is four and a half years. Among our respondents we found a few women who had initially come to Dhaka very young to work as maids and then either remained and joined garment work, or went back home to get married and returned to the capital after their marriages had failed. A few of our respondents who had initially worked in garment factories left the job and started working as non-resident maids, or as piecework workers for sari manufacturers (*carchupi*), after having children.

Another group of female migrants are the girls who move from rural villages to district towns and to Dhaka to study, after completing the 10$^{th}$ year of school or after year 12$^{th}$ to enrol at University. These migrants come mainly from middle class and well-off

households, but some of our Garo respondents also migrated with the intention of continuing their studies.

### 2.4 Jobs and Employment for women/girls.

Employment for women in rural areas fell sharply from 1976 onwards as a result of mechanization of the post-harvest tasks, which provided jobs for men, out of the activities that women used to perform next to home. Nowadays, the scope for wage employment for women and girls in rural areas is extremely limited. Women belonging to poorest landless families may take work as daily labourers in the fields, where they work for very low daily rates, or more often as domestics in neighbouring houses, where they are usually paid in kind. These jobs, apart from having a low return in economic terms, are perceived as contrary to *purdah* norms and women who have to take them are held in very low esteem. A few educated women may find employment in NGOs, or as teachers, but the supply for such jobs is still much higher than the demand. Although the rate of girls' enrolment in secondary school has significantly increased in the 2000s, reflecting a widespread awareness of the importance of education, rural households, especially landless or functionally landless agricultural families, can hardly afford it up to higher levels despite the economic incentives provided by the state such as the stipend program[5]. Completing the first cycle of secondary school and obtaining SSC (Secondary School Certificate) after 10 years of schooling, is expensive and not perceived to lead to any desirable form of employment for girls.

Thus, when a girl reaches a marriageable age, commonly between the 6$^{th}$ and 10$^{th}$ year of schooling, and decisions about her future have to be are taken, the respective advantages and disadvantages of different options are considered, as well as their costs. With investment in education not ensuring a return, marriage remains for poor parents the best way to secure a daughter's future. There is consensus however that this scenario has been significantly altered with the expansion of the garment manufacturing industry that has become the first form of mass wage employment for women and girls outside home. Since 1976 there has been an exponential growth of the RMG sector that accounts today for 80% of total exports. There are about 5000 garment factories that employ more than 4 million people (Hossain, 2012). Migration for wage employment in the RMG sector has become a feasible alternative to early marriage and childbearing for rural teenagers.

The personal care industry has also developed and provides employment to about 100,000 women (Akter, 2009) in about 2000 registered beauty parlours, mainly in urban areas all over the country (Rahman, 2010). Although the parlours are usually owned by Bengali Bangladeshi, the workers in them are most often young women belonging to ethnic minorities.

### 2.5 Urban Living conditions

Most of the internal labour migrants settle down in city slums whose population has been constantly increasing, with migrants constituting 53% of the population of Dhaka city slums (UNDP 2013). Slums, known as *bustee,* are built on government or private land and are characterised by poverty, very low quality housing, high population density, and limited access to services. Slum conditions are however diverse. According to a survey

5 In rural areas girls are provided a stipend to cover education costs up to grade 12.

conducted in 2006 (CUS et al. 2006) in some areas of Dhaka, most *bustee* were affected by poor drainage, flooding and very poor housing, but only a minority of them were affected by even worse conditions such as lack of electricity, cooking gas, tap water, and insecure tenure, threat of eviction, and a need to share water sources and latrines with large numbers of other households.

Slums are usually controlled by local 'leaders' who are well connected to the local police and/or some political party. These 'leaders', who are sometimes associated with mafia-like criminal gangs, known as '*mastaan',* control the delivery of services and constitute a well established informal power structure that may act in the name of the '*samaj*' (society/moral community). They are recognized as having the power to enforce the rules related to social life through a system of informal arbitration where they act in the name of the community' s honour and prestige. In our study we found instances where they punished young people involved in premarital relationship and forced people to marry or fined transgressors. When connected to criminal gangs these interventions in the personal sphere are all part of a system of legitimised extortion. NGOs or organizations working in particular *bustee* find they have to negotiate with these informal power structures when employing people, establishing services and so on (Camellia, Khan, Naved, 2012).

The control they exert over young people's behaviour, especially young women's, occurs in the context of widespread parental concerns for the sexual security of girls and the predatory behaviour of men. Parents express these as powerful motivations to marry their daughters when they are very young (Rashid 2011). This resonates with research conducted by Terre des Hommes Italy and Aparajeyo Bangladesh (see Aparajeyo Bangladesh, 2010) in the slums where they work. Poverty and the lack of security are the main reasons quoted by parents to withdraw their daughters from school as early as 11-12 years of age and for trying to either employ them as domestics or in garment factories, or to give them in marriage. In the families living in the slums both parents usually work and, when not at school, girls remain at home without protection and control. Parents fear that they may enter into '*prem*' (love) relationships, or be forced into sexual relationships. These relationships will seriously jeopardize their future marriage prospects. According to teachers and parents, young boys and girls are particularly 'prone to emotions' and 'easily fall in love', in which case they may get married without their parents' consent. There is also a common perception that so called 'love marriages' are on the rise, with an increasing number of very young couples eloping, hoping to force their parents consent through a '*fait accompli*'. Teachers and adults also report that, in their experience, these marriages are unstable.

Some recent research has also shown that, while there is a higher prevalence and social acceptance of gender-based violence in the slums compared to other urban areas (NIPORT et al 2008; Garcia-Moreno et al 2005), migrant women and girls who live away from familiar social networks are more vulnerable to violence and to imposed early marriage than those who were born in the slums, or those who migrated with parents or husbands (Camellia, Khan, Naved 2012).

### 2.4 Government Policy on women's international and internal migration

The Government of Bangladesh has long recognized the importance of international migration. Overseas migration of both men and women is an important development issue. The Government has taken several steps to promote this kind of migration while

protecting migrant workers, through legislative instruments, by stipulating agreements with destination countries and by enacting strict regulations to discipline and control the employment agencies through which workers are employed in Gulf and South East Asian countries. Unlike international migration, the phenomenon of internal migration as a correlate of urbanization and industrialization has not been directly addressed by specific migration policies, although there is some recognition that they raise gender differentiated concerns. The specific issues raised by the internal migration of adolescent girls away from their families is a very neglected area addressed in this study, which aims to identify specific areas of intervention.

# 3 Fieldwork Methods and Methodology

## 3.1 Choice of participants

This study of girls and young women who had migrated from rural areas to work in Dhaka as adolescents, focuses on two main groups: those who had migrated with the intention of finding a job in the garment manufacturing sector, and a group who are currently employed as beauticians in 'beauty parlours'. The first group of 47 migrants includes 6 older migrants who have worked or are working in sectors different from the manufacturing one and some migrants whose first migration experience had been as children domestics. The latter group comprises 13 girls and young women belonging to the Garo/ Mandi ethnic minority.

*The Garo/Mandi*
The Garo, who also call themselves Mandi (human beings) to distinguish themselves from the Garo who live in India in the hills of Meghalaya, are one of the so-called tribal communities in Bangladesh and occupy mainly the plains of Mymensingh district and the forest area of Modhupur in Tangail district. While they are Bangladeshi by citizenship, they do not belong to the Bengali-speaking majority of the population. They consider themselves a distinct community, sharing a common cultural identity, language, traditions and experiences. Since partition in 1947, they occupy, like the other 20 to 56 ethnic minorities, a marginalized social, political and economic position in respect to the Muslim majority (Bal, 2007). The Garo living in Bangladesh are between 80,000 to 100,000 and are now scattered all over the country, with more than 2000 of them working and living in Dhaka. They are mostly Christians, either Catholic or Baptists. Women are mainly employed as cooks, housekeepers and babysitters as well as in beauty parlours, in NGOs and church organizations; men as garment workers, drivers, night guards and NGO staff. Many Garo, both men and women, also migrate to Dhaka to study.

## 3.2 Methods and Data Collection

A mixed multi-methods approach was adopted combining different data-collection techniques, together with a qualitative approach aiming at ensuring the participation and involvement of migrant girls by building rapport and trust between them and the team of researchers. Most of the research was carried out in Dhaka, but some data was collected in the communities of origin of eight of the interviewed migrants.

Survey questionnaire: 13 migrants from the Garo community and 47 from the Bengali community were interviewed using a questionnaire. The survey questionnaire allows to draw a socio-economic profile of the migrants, beside containing basic quantifiable information about their migration history.

Focus Group Discussions: seven FGDs were conducted: one with young girls working in beauty parlours; two with girls who migrated alone who were living in either Bauniabandh or Bhola slums; one with (mainly) young domestic workers who are receiving some assistance from 2 local NGOs in the context of a European Union funded project; two with women who are about to migrate abroad to Middle Eastern countries; one with a mixed group of migrant women who are members and beneficiaries of AWAJ Foundation, an organization that campaigns for garment workers rights.

Key informant interviews: six expert interviews were conducted with representatives of local and international NGOs working on issues related to internal migration and adolescence.

Life stories: 16 life stories have been collected by visiting and talking to some of the girl migrants more than once over 2014. Meetings with these girls took place not only in their homes but also in other locations and occasions such as the botanical garden and cinema hall.

Informal information through participation, field diary and field visits: during the Dhaka fieldwork, insights on the issues around adolescent girl migration were also gained via informal conversations with the research assistants, the interviewees, family members and friends of the interviewees, other migrants, people working in NGOs, slum residents and others. Observations were noted in a field diary.

In the places of origin, besides informal conversation with the parents, relatives and neighbours of the migrants, in each location a high school was visited and a group discussion arranged with students of class 8 and 9 and with some teachers (unrecorded). In-depth discussions and focus group discussions were carried out with the members of migrants' households.

### 3.3 Fieldwork and Research Team

The fieldwork was carried out in three phases. The first part was conducted between January and April 2014 in Pallabi and Mirpur *thana* (an administrative subdivision of Dhaka city district, literally police-station) at the outskirts of Dhaka, one of the main destinations for migrants who move from rural areas in search of work opportunities. Most of our respondent resided in two slums: Bauniabandh and Bhola in Pallabi.

The second part of the fieldwork was carried out in the same areas in August 2014. In this phase a number of respondents already interviewed were identified for follow up meetings. This allowed for consolidating information, establishing greater trust and collecting more in-depth life story material.

In the third phase in November-December 2014, the fieldwork focused on the areas of origin of the migrants and in 5 villages in the districts of Bogra and Netrakona. In the same period a documentary movie was shot in the 2 slums where the interviewed migrants reside and in Bogra district, in 2 migrants' villages of origin.

*The research team*
In addition to Dr Nicoletta del Franco, the research team comprised a counsellor from ARBAN and a project coordinator from Terre des Hommes Italy, and benefitted from the substantial support of our local partner institutions: Terre des Hommes Italy and their two local partners ARBAN (Association for Realization of Basic Needs) and Aparajeyo Bangladesh (AB). An Mphil student from Dhaka University was employed as research assistant.

In line with our initial intention to involve adolescent girls in the research, 5 girls who had grown up in the slum were identified early on through ARBAN to be part of the research team and to help with administering the questionnaire. The possibility of involving migrant adolescents was ruled out because of their time constraints. A meeting in

Bauniabandh slum was organized with some teachers of ARBAN primary schools (one in each of the 5 blocks in which the slum is divided), the counsellor employed by ARBAN, and 12 adolescent girls, who had studied in ARBAN school who had said they were willing to help as assistants. 7 of them were chosen to be trained and in the course of a one-day long training workshop, 5 of them were recruited to work in the project.

During the workshop the girls, the research assistant and one staff each from TDH, Italy and ARBAN were familiarised with the objectives and the rationale of the research, the methodology and methods, the requirements of confidentiality and anonymity and how to administer the survey questionnaire. One of the 5 girls worked in the project only during the first three months of fieldwork. The other 4 were involved during the whole year in different ways, their circumstances and their stories as adolescents and as long-term residents in Bauniabandh slum provided important insights to understand the social context and the ways in which young girls negotiate spaces and opportunities for their aspirations and dreams.

*Accessing the migrant girls*
It was relatively easy to access the migrant girls. TDH Italy, ARBAN and Aparajeyo Bangladesh (AB) have been working in partnership in the slum areas of Pallabi for about 10 years and have a well-established presence that consists of 5 primary schools run by ARBAN in Bauniabandh slum and some educational centres of AB. I had worked for TDH Italy in Bangladesh in the past and was familiar with the activities and the areas of work of the NGOs. This facilitated the access to the slums and the 5 adolescents mentioned above were essential in contacting their migrant peers in Bauniabandh area by visiting all the households of the slum and enquiring about the presence of migrants in each of them.

Other respondents were identified through Aparajeyo Bangladesh in whose office a first focus group discussion with 12 migrant girls living in the Bhola slum, was conducted.

With respect to the Garo/Mandi migrants most of those interviewed were already well known to me from previous visits to Bangladesh.

With some migrants the research team established a profound rapport that evolved over the whole year (2014), thus allowing us to follow up the main events in their lives and the changes in their circumstances.

*Interviewing*
The interviews with the Bengali girls have all been carried out by myself, always accompanied and supported by either the research assistant, or the counsellor from ARBAN or the project coordinator from TDH Italy. Some questionnaires have been administered directly by the 5 girls with the support of the research assistant. The interviews took place in the residence of the girls in the 2 slums mentioned. This was always in the presence of peers and other slum residents, who commented on what was being said. Four to five women who migrated with their husbands have also been interviewed. The experiences and stories of the 5 adolescent girls who grew up in the slum are also important for a comparison with their migrant peers and because, together with other informal conversations, they give insights about the social context of the slum, including its strong social norms and power relations.

I met up with, girls belonging to the Garo/Mandi ethnic minority directly, by visiting the beauty parlours where they work as aestheticians.

In terms of obstacles encountered, the main problem was the very little free time that garment workers have. Working hours are on average from 9 in the morning to 7-8 in the evenings, including overtime, and six days a week. Almost all the garment factories in Mirpur, where the Bengali respondents were employed, are closed only on Fridays and in some periods not even once a week. This meant that we had to concentrate most of the interviews in one day a week or on holidays.

The respondents however where very interested in the research and eager to participate. They were happy to give us their parents' addresses so that we could visit them. The migrants interviewed in Dhaka were mainly from a wide spread of districts, Bogra, Netrakona, Jamalpur, Mymensingh, Barisal and Bhola and from different villages of the same district. With limited time available to look at the communities of origin we could only choose initially 5 girls coming from 2 different districts and focus on visiting their households and communities. Netrakona district was chosen because it includes the hilly northern areas where the Garo girls come from and Bogra district was chosen because of the profound rapport that had been established with 2 girls coming from that area. Three more households of migrant girls were also visited in Bogra.

*Translating and analysing interviews*

Recorded interviews have been transcribed by the research assistants in Bengali and subsequently translated in English by the research assistants and myself. Preliminary analysis of the interviews and other field data was done at the end of each period of fieldwork and full analysis from January 2015 onwards.

## 4 Social profile of respondents

This section sketches some basic social information about the 60 respondents in the study. I start with three tables showing their age, age at migration and years at destination. It has to be taken into account that some of the girls/women did not remember precisely how many years they spent at destination and some of them, especially the older women, knew their age only approximately. As can be seen from Table 1 a majority of our respondents were over 18 when they were interviewed. More important perhaps is table 2, which gives the age of first migration of the study respondents.

Table 1 Age of respondents

| | Total | Bengali | Garo |
|---|---|---|---|
| Up to 13 | 2 | 2 | 0 |
| 13 to 17 | 12 | 11 | 1 |
| 18-24 | 28 | 24 | 4 |
| < 24 | 18 | 10 | 8 |
| | *60* | *47* | *13* |

Table 2 Age at first migration

| | Total | Bengali | Garo |
|---|---|---|---|
| Under 13 | 11 | 11 | 0 |
| 13-17 | 41 | 30 | 11 |
| 18-20 | 8 | 6 | 2 |
| | *60* | *47* | *13* |

As we looked specifically for girls who had migrated as adolescents, all the girls we interviewed had moved to Dhaka when they were under 20. Table 2 suggests that a majority of the adolescent migrants moved when they are aged between 13 and 17, but a significant number were under 13 when they made their first migration.

Table 3 Years at destination

| | Total | Bengali | Garo |
|---|---|---|---|
| Up to 2 | 24 | 22 | 2 |
| 3-5 | 14 | 12 | 2 |
| 6-10 | 5 | 2 | 3 |
| More than 10 | 17 | 11 | 6 |
| | *60* | *47* | *13* |

The initial plan was to interview 30 recent migrants and 30 older ones who had 10 or more years of residence at destination. As shown in table 3, instead we could interview only 17 (11 Bengali) migrants who had been living in Dhaka for more than 10 years, while the majority of the respondents, 38 (34 Bengali) had migrated up to 5 years before. This is in itself a finding that deserve some considerations.

One of the reasons we couldn't find many older migrants among the Bengali, could be that after some years of work and/or after marriage, with an improvement of their economic situation, the migrants move to a different area of the city. We found this had

happened to 5 of our respondents. As we focused our search for adolescent migrants in 2 *bustee* areas, we tended to find there only those who had migrated recently, who were single and whose income is not enough for them to afford better housing.

Secondly, it seems that most of the young girls who move to the city for garment work tend to return home after a few years or move on to migration further afield. The fact that we found a high number of girls who had migrated very recently (24 up to two years before) and that during 2014, 8 of the girls interviewed left their jobs and either went back home or migrated abroad, suggests that for the majority who migrate for garment work this is not a long-term life choice.

The data in the tables are consistent with our qualitative findings that although some adolescents move to Dhaka very early, after leaving school, sometimes to follow older sisters, many return to their village in the space of few months or few years, because of the difficult work conditions, because their health deteriorates, or to get married when their parents find a suitable match. Some of the successful ones migrate internationally. We found also a few examples of respondents' sisters who moved to Dhaka at some point and went back home after few months. The fact that garment work is a form of long-term employment only for a small percentage of women/girls is shown also by a number of recent and less recent studies (see Hossain, 2012).

These observations are also consistent with the answers we obtained when we asked the girls their plans for the future. These are synthetises in the following table.

Table 4 Plans for the future

| | Total | Bengali | Garo |
|---|---|---|---|
| Remain at destination | 14 | 12 | 2 |
| Return home | 31 | 23 | 8 |
| Not sure | 9 | 7 | 2 |
| Further migration | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Further migration abroad | 3 | 3 | 0 |
| Wish to continue education | 3 | 1 | 2 |

It must be noticed that only 14 migrants expressed the wish to remain at destination: made up of some who have married after migration, whose in-laws reside in Dhaka and who do not contemplate the possibility of returning home and others whose whole family has moved to the city. Three girls expressed the desire to migrate abroad and in the course of 2015, two of them actually migrated to Lebanon and Oman respectively. Out of three girls who wanted to continue studying, two are actually doing it: one of them is a Garo who went back home and left the job in the beauty saloon, the other one, a Bengali is studying at the Bangladesh Open University.

The situation is different for the Garo, as detailed in tables 3. It was much easier to find Garo girls who had moved some time ago and appear to have settled in Dhaka (9 out of 13 have been in Dhaka for more than 6 years). All these 9 girls are settled with husband and family and plan to go back home only in their old age.

Table 5 Education

| | Total | Bengali | Garo |
|---|---|---|---|
| Never gone to school | 10 | 10 | 0 |
| Years 1 to 5 | 22 | 21 | 1 |
| 6 to 10 | 26 | 16 | 10 |
| 11 to 12 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Bachelor Degree | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Currently studying | 3 | 1 | 2 |

As table 5 shows, most of the study respondents are not currently attending school or college. Only one of the Bengali migrants and 2 of the Garo migrants are combining work with education.

The level of education of the Bengali respondents is rather low. 10 girls haven't gone to school at all and in total 32 have not studied more than 5 years. None of them have studied more then 10 years. Most of them said they stopped studying because the family couldn't afford their education expenses and/or needed another earning member, and most have not studied since they came to Dhaka. Only a woman who came to Dhaka, first as a domestic worker and who now works for an NGO has started studying again at the Bangladesh Open University. The other Bengali migrants were not even aware of this opportunity but said that they would be happy to do Friday courses if they were available.

The level of education of the Garo girls is rather higher, with most of them having studied up to class 10, with 1 who obtained HSC (Higher Secondary Certificate) and 1 who obtained a Bachelor Degree. This probably reflects the fact that some of them claimed to belong to 'in the middle' '*majhari*' families. Some of them who did not migrate immediately after leaving school had previously worked locally. Some others had intended to work and study once in Dhaka, but had not managed to do so. One of the respondents, after a few months in the parlour, had realized that studying was not possible, and returned home. One Garo moved to Dhaka to continue studying and is now combining this with working in the parlour part time.

Table 6 Economic condition of family of origin

| | Total | Bengali | Garo |
|---|---|---|---|
| Very poor | 31 | 28 | 3 |
| Poor | 21 | 17 | 4 |
| In the middle | 8 | 2 | 6 |
| Well-off | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | *60* | *47* | *13* |

The survey asked respondents about the reasons for migration and about their household' sources of livelihood at the time of their migration. These answers have been used to provide estimates of the economic status of the migrants' households of origin in table 6.

*'Poor' (gorib):* are land-less or functionally land-less rural households, whose members are engaged in seasonal daily labour, share-cropping or minor income generating activities.

'*Very poor' (khub gorib*): are households who completely lack social and economic resources. These are either female headed households, or families whose adult men suffer

from some disability, or are too old or too sick to work, or they are poor households who live in disaster prone areas.

Both poor and very poor households are vulnerable.

*'In the middle' (majhari):* include households that own some land, with members, usually brothers or sisters of the girls, who either had migrated before our respondent and already contributed remittances to support their parents, or were locally employed. This means that the households are secure, stable, and do not depend only on others to get employment, or land to cultivate. Those who are 'in the middle' have land, fruit plants, animals and some of them are employed or run small trades.

None of the migrants households could be classified as *'well-off' (borolok).*

As shown in the table the majority of the Bengali migrants come from vulnerable or very vulnerable households, with only two of them who can be considered 'in the middle'. Among the Garo, 6 out of the 13 households who can be considered in the middle. This classification is, of course, very approximate. The economic situation can change quickly, as, for example, when the sudden death of an earning member can precipitate a poor household into extreme poverty.

Table 7 Marital status

| | Total | Bengali | Garo |
|---|---|---|---|
| Never married | 29 | 25 | 4 |
| Married when migrated | 2 | 2 | 0 |
| Married after migration | 14 | 5 | 9 |
| Divorced | 12 | 12 | 0 |
| Married and divorced more than once | 3 | 3 | |
| | *60* | *47* | *13* |

As table 7 shows about half of the study respondents are single and have never married. However initially, 3 of the 9 girls who married and divorced before migrating told us that they were un-married. We discovered that they had been or were married when we visited their families in the village. It is possible that others among the 29 girls who told us they were unmarried, had actually married before migrating but didn't want to disclose this (cases discussed extensively in section 7).

A total of 16 of our respondents were married women. Fourteen had married after they had migrated. One woman was married at the time of her migration and was married when we interviewed her but she did not tell us this. She left her husband after a quarrel and moved to Dhaka where we met her. After a few months she joined her husband and son again in her village of origin. 1 woman had divorced her husband because he was violent and moved to Dhaka but remarried with the same man after 2 years in Dhaka, where they now live together, Their 8 year old son lives in the village alternating between his maternal and paternal grand-parents.

In all 15 of our respondents were divorced. 8 of them had divorced before they migrated and 4 after that. Three married and divorced before migrating and then married again or were involved in relationships after migration and divorced again or were abandoned. One of them was ashamed of having been married twice and disclosed that only once

every one except myself had left the room. The other two had actually been cheated into a second relationship and were left after they got pregnant.

Table 8 Children

| | Total | Bengali | Garo |
|---|---|---|---|
| No children | 39 | 34 | 5 |
| Children living with respondent | 14 | 8 | 6 |
| Children living at origin | 5 | 4 | 1 |
| Children living with father | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| | *60* | *47* | *13* |

According to the survey questionnaire data, two thirds of our respondents did not have children at the time of the interview. In the case of the Garo most of the children live with both parents in Dhaka, only one at the moment of the interview lived with the grand-parents in the village of origin, where he was sent to college, and one with the father, who was temporarily working and living out of Dhaka. In the case of the Bengali migrants, only women who stopped working after marriage or those who have older children, who can look after the younger ones, can afford to keep their children with them. Otherwise children live with the migrants' parents or in-laws at origin.

# 5 Becoming a migrant

This section discusses the circumstances of the migrant girls before they move to Dhaka and their motives for migrating. The aim is to understand the context in which the decisions to migrate arises, the part our respondents had in the decision-making process and the kind of agency they express. In order to do this I start by presenting the answers our respondents gave to the question of the survey about the reasons for migration as summarized in table 9 below. This section then explores the longer and detailed replies that some of the girls gave to the survey questionnaire and their life stories as they illuminate the complex motivations for migration and the complex circumstances in which their decision matures.

## 5.1 Motives of migration

Table 9 Reasons for migration

| | Total | Bengali | Garo |
|---|---|---|---|
| Poverty | 43 | 38 | 5 |
| Failed marriage | 5 | 5 | 0 |
| Avoid getting married | 4 | 3 | 1 |
| Continue education | 4 | 0 | 4 |
| Had to stop education | 5 | 4 | 1 |
| Wanting to help the family | 17 | 14 | 3 |
| Death of one or both parents | 19 | 18 | 1 |
| Desire for more freedom | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| Loss of house due to natural disaster/climate change | 4 | 4 | 0 |
| Learn a job | 4 | | 4 |
| Difficult family situation | 5 | 4 | 1 |

Poverty was quoted as a reason for migrating by the majority of the girls (43), together with the will to help their families (17). This was cited by proportionally more of the Bengali migrants than the Garo. In 15 cases out of the total, the family situation was precipitated by the death of the girls' father. Four girls decided to leave after their mother's death, in 3 cases because the father remarried. Five girls decided to leave because of difficult family relations, mainly due to the presence of a step-mother or step-father, and in 2 cases because of physical or psychological abuse.

Another important trigger of the decision to migrate appears to be climate change (mainly river erosion and seasonal flooding). This was mentioned as a reason by girls who come from Southern districts, like Bhola and Barisal, and from some areas of Jamalpur and Shariatpur districts.

These are some of the replies the girls gave in the questionnaire:

Khaleda: *I had to help my own family, my father died, I don't have brothers, we needed money, there is no possibility to work in the village, I needed to work in garments to make some money, because we were in need, nobody would have given me money if I stayed in the village.*

Lima: *My mother had mental problems and my father was dumb, we didn't own land, my brother was a daily labourer, our house was threatened by flooding, I had to leave.*

Mily: *My father died, the family couldn't survive, with my brothers income the family couldn't survive, so because of 'obhab' (lack) I came.*

Anila: *My father died long time ago, my mother was working and the family was surviving in that way. Now she is getting old, so she can't wok anymore. That's why I left the village and I came to Dhaka: to work. In the village we own only a hut where we live, nothing else.*

From these answers it appears clearly how the decision to migrate is due to many interconnected factors and events. 'Poverty' itself is a condition which includes different situations and circumstances. Most migrant girls talked of poverty as a situation of '*obhab*' (literally lack) that in most severe cases was connected with the death or illness of the family breadwinner, the lack of support from brothers, some environmental disaster, or a sudden emergency such as having to pay a large dowry for a daughter's marriage. Being 'very poor' means, as we have seen above, lacking both economic and social resources, not being able to count on the support of male relatives, and not having good connections '*jogajog*' with affluent people who could provide work or economic support in times of need.

From the life stories we gain more insights on the context and circumstances of these migrants. The detailed account that Jamila gave of her family situation in the village, can apply with some variations to the poorest among the participants to our research: *At some point my father got very ill with brain cancer but my brother was convinced that in Bangladesh there was no proper treatment available. He thought of selling everything we had to get some money and take him abroad but my father didn't want to go. He told us: I might die any way and then you'll end up with nothing. There is no need of going. He got treatment in Bangladesh but it didn't work. My brother was the only one supporting the family. He was keeping the family going and paying for my study. We are 4, myself, my elder brother and two younger ones. There are also my mother and my grand mother who is completely blind since 10 years. So my brother was paying for my study and buying medicines for my father. I realized when I enrolled in class 8 that my brother could not any longer pay for everything. This was in 2012. I got the standard scholarship when I was in class 8 but I could not get the one based on merit because I could not afford private tuition. So I took the decision that I would not sit the final exam…I argued with my brother because of that and I went to stay for sometime with an aunt…We could not pay my exams fees, my father was ill, we had a lot of expenses for his medicines. At some point my brother wanted to kill himself. My mother was crying, so I thought...I cannot keep studying, we cannot pay. What would happen if my brother died?*

These words and stories are consistent with older and recent studies where poverty appears as the driving force of migration for garment work (Amin et al,1997; Kabeer and Mahmud 2004, Kibria 1995, Feldman 2001). In some way girls' choice appears to be mainly motivated by a condition of economic need and a lack of work opportunities. Girls also mention how the felt responsible for their families and that they wanted to contribute to the family livelihood. Lima's '*I had to leave*' can surely be read as an expression of lack of choice but also as a conscious assumption of responsibility towards her family members. Some girls willingly gave up they studies to look for work. Others expressed hopes in a better future and awareness that migration might open more opportunities for them and their families.

Another reason quoted by the girls, sometimes together with economic need, sometimes as the only motive of their choice is some sort of intra-household conflict, at times translating into abusive relationships with parents or relatives. These are complex situations that included cases of girls who had lost one of their parents and ended up living with uncles or aunts, or girls who did not get along with a step-mother or step-

father, felt uncared for or were mistreated and girls who suffered from their parents abusive relationship.

Jhorna, a Garo, left when her father remarried, after 9 years of schooling: *My step- mum wanted me to leave, I would have studied more. My father and my step-sisters offered to help me but she didn't want me there and she arranged for me to come to Dhaka through a relative of her.*

Monira who is now in her thirties was raised by her grandparents and by some aunts. Her father left her mother when she was pregnant of her and after her birth her mother abandoned her. I met her a few times in the course of 2014, the first time it was in a slum area in North Dhaka where she was queuing at a dispensary run by an Italian nun, waiting to get some medicines. She was ill and mentally distressed because after she came back from Lebanon where she had worked for three years, she could not find another job and she was planning to migrate again. Some months later I met her again after she found the job as a maid and baby sitter in an expatriate family. She was living alone in a rented room and travelling everyday to Gulshan 2, the neighbourhood in North Dhaka where all the foreign Embassies offices and most of the international aid agencies offices are located. She was eager to tell her story. Like some others' her story was punctuated by frequent reference to the '*koshto*' (hardship, suffering difficulties, problems) she had to bear with for most of her life.

*When I was about six month of age in the womb of my mother, my parents separated. I had two elder brothers then, one of them died later. When I was born, I had no father. My mother married again and left me in my maternal grandmother's house. I lived there even after the death of grandmother and grandfather, with some aunts. My maternal aunties did not love me; they made me suffer a lot. I wanted to go to school, but they did not allow me to go. They wanted their children to be educated and wanted all the household chores to be done by me. I had no paternal identity, and my mother never recognized me as her daughter… Try to understand how many challenges I had to face since my childhood! When I was supposed to be busy studying I was given dishes and clothes to wash. I had no option but to do these odd jobs, because I didn't know a way out, I didn't know where to go. My maternal aunt pretended to be ill and I had to do all the work. When I was ill, she hit me. I had to undergo a lot of hardship; those who do not have parents have to suffer a lot. I am telling you all these because I think you will understand, people usually do not…Because my aunts were torturing me, I came to Dhaka with a neighbour to work in garments; younger girls were recruited in garments at that time. I was around 11 or 12. That 'khala'* (auntie) *managed a job for me at a garment factory with her daughter.*

Another circumstance directly or indirectly connected with a young woman's decision to migrate, is a failed or difficult marriage. This concerned 9 of our interviewees; 2 of them went back with their husbands and 5 clearly mentioned the failure of their marriage among the reasons of their decision to leave. They all had similar experiences. They married at a very young age between 12 and 14. Some discovered as soon as they reached their husband's place that he was married already. In other cases the husband took a second wife and abandoned the first one. In the remaining cases the girls decided to leave because their husband and in laws were violent. As Nurjahan recalls: *They married me off when I was very little. At that time I was just busy playing…My mother in law started from the beginning mistreating me, I was crying a lot. For the wedding they gave me an old sari, old jewellery.* Nurjahan finally divorced but found herself in a very difficult situation back home. Her father had died and her mother could not afford to take care of her, so she went to live with one of her brothers but there she didn't feel confortable. *Then, I stayed in my home village for 3 months at my elder brother's place, but I didn't like it…my sister in law was looking at me in such a way…so I came to Dhaka'. My father died and my mother was crying…but I came and now I work…I was hoping I would marry off my sister…then I will get married…*

Halima's story shows how difficult it is to disentangle the many interconnected factors and events that motivate the decision to migrate to Dhaka to work in a garment factory. We met her 3 times in the dark and tiny room of Bauniabandh slum where she was leaving alone. She looked stressed and nervous, while she was telling her story, she kept tearing nervously one end of her sari and suddenly blowing into tears. She was thin and looked unwell and severely traumatized especially the first time we met. Halima grew up in a '*kacha ghor*', a mud hut, with her maternal grandfather and her mother. She told us that her father had left her mother and remarried when she was little. Halima' s granddad didn't own land and had been working as a fisherman. Since Halima was little, the three of them were surviving thanks to Halima's mum's work, who was paid in kind, as a servant in neighbouring houses. Halima's uncles were living nearby but none of them helped. When we asked Halima about her childhood she spent more than 20 minutes describing what they had been eating, how they had been starving and trying to make ends meet. Halima went to a Koranic school for a few years but her schooling was frequently interrupted because from the age of 8 or 9 she was sent to work as a domestic in Dhaka. She kept going back and forth until she came of age (*boyos hoece*, puberty) and went back to the village to get married. After 5 years of marriage she left her an unfaithful husband and migrated to Dhaka. *When I was about 13, my uncles said that I was a grown up and I had to marry, my mother agreed saying that as a girl (meye) my honour was very important and that if I lost it, it would be lost forever and I would not have found anyone willing to marry me… I was with my husband for 5 years. He was not good, he wasn't giving me money for daily expenses, he was a gambler, he had a relationship with another woman. I am an only child, my mother wanted me to be happy and she managed despite a lot of difficulties to collect the money for my dowry. My husband ruined my life. After all this I decided to come to Dhaka.*

Some others didn't mention their marriage failure as reason for their migration; actually as we said, 4 of them did not mention their marriage at all. In all the 4 cases it was by talking to their parents or relatives that we came to know that they had been married when we visited their relatives in their village of origin. Shirina had argued with her husband and left him and a child in the village. We met her in Bauniabandh slum where she stayed for only 6 months and then again in her village where she had returned after her husband had asked her back. Lamia who also had a child from her marriage, told us that she mainly decided to migrate to look for work and think at her future. Rita said she migrated to help her parents while her mother and relatives told us that she wanted to earn some money to afford buying '*those kind of things that girls of that age like*' such as dresses and cosmetics.

It is easy to explain why some migrants did not initially mention of having been married: they did not want to jeopardize their future opportunities by letting us and other people in the area know about their first marriage. In fact, even in cases in which is not the wife who can be blamed for a broken union, her reputation and the prestige of her family are damaged and her chances of marrying again while remaining in the village are very reduced. Moreover, for poor families a divorced young daughter may become a liability. Migration seems to offer multiple advantages: a chance to escape the social stigma at home, the possibility of starting a new life where no one knows your circumstances and the possibility to contribute to one's family well being.

Finally, it was only for a small minority that education was a motive for migration. All those (4) who migrated with the intention of continuing their studies were Garo like Rina: *I thought I would work and study, I wanted to pass SSC and then become a nurse.* Like Rina they were all hoping that they would be able to work and study at the same time but only one

of them has had the opportunity to do so, probably favoured by the fact that the owner of the parlour where she works part-time is a Garo herself and a far-relative of her. One of the Garo migrants after a few months in the capital and when she realized that she would not have any change to study while living in the parlour's hostel, went back home and enrolled in school again.

### 5.2 The decision to migrate

It is only by listening to girls' migration stories that we can understand not just the multiplicity of circumstances behind their migration but also the complexity of the situation in which the decision to migrate matures. It is true, on the one hand that the decision is in some way generated by a perceived lack of livelihood alternatives at home, but, on the other hand, the stories we mentioned here show that it comes after a conscious evaluation of different possibilities, that in most cases it is discussed with the other family members and it is a response to a chance.

Lamia after her father death used to work as a domestic in the village. Her mother was also doing the same work and her sister was still at school. At some point she realized that this would not secure her livelihood: *'I was only getting food three times a day and no money, nothing else…in this way my life wouldn't improve. One has to think at the future… there were two of us working there and the other girl said: I am going to Dhaka, are you coming?'*

Sharmin divorced her husband who was violent and after sometime at her parents' she realized that they would have not been able to secure a living to her and her son. She accepted a neighbours proposal and decided, not without difficulty and overcoming her parents' opposition, to move to Dhaka to work. *After the separation I left my child there and I returned to my parents' house and stayed there for 1 and a half month. I had a cousin in Dhaka, I could not stay without my son, I was crying, I was thinking a lot, I was nervous I was thinking: I have a child, the family is broken, what shall I do now where I would live! My parents are old, they cannot even survive themselves, how would they feed me? Then when I got in touch with my cousin I said: you live in Dhaka, is there any job I could do? Is there anything? She said that she could help me get a job in a garments factory, where she worked.*

The way the girls talk about the decision to migrate also confirms that none of them was sent to Dhaka against their will. At one end of the continuum we have only one girl who left without consulting her parents and that, at the moment of the interview, was not in contact with them. About the reasons for her migration Samia said: *I was bored of studying, the teacher who was giving me tutorials was not so helpful. I was very young and my parents wanted to marry me off. They didn't trust me. All together, there was a bad environment at home. I was undergoing a lot of pressure.* When we met Samia she was living on her own in a rented room in Bauniabandh slum, she was working in a garment factory and was spending most of her time off work with an older friend and her parents. At work nobody knew that she was actually living alone because this would have made people suspicious about her morals. In-fact even her neighbours thought that sometimes she was not behaving properly. She was flirting with a boy and spending too much time outside. Out of our 47 Bengali respondents only Samia and Shamima (see below) declared that they migrated to escape the family pressure and an early arranged marriage. As we discussed above some others migrated because of difficult familial relationships but these were all cases where one of the parents was absent and substituted by a step one.

Shamima lied to her parents about her real intentions and pretended she was just

temporarily going to visit relatives: *After I stopped studying I came to Dhaka, I thought I would do something for myself. After my father tried to give me in marriage, I came to Dhaka, I stayed at my aunt's and then after sometime I looked for a job and I found it.* However, she never broke the relationships with them, after some months of work in Dhaka she went back home to visit her family and asked their consent to marry a man she met in the city.

In most cases the decision to migrate was discussed with parents and accepted by them. Some also report that their parents tried to discourage them and persuade them not to leave. At the other extreme we have situations where the parents proposed that their daughters migrate and took the initiative of arranging accommodation and work for them through relatives.

Sangjida agreed to move to Dhaka for the first time when she was 8 years old.…*at that time we didn't have land or property, in some way we passed the days without eating, the family was surviving thanks to the occasional help of people. My father said that one of his cousins was living in Dhaka and that they needed one girl to look after their two girl children and that I could go to Dhaka, I would be fine there, what was I doing at home? …At that time I was little, I though...maybe if I go to Dhaka I'll be fine… here I starve, I don't get good food…* Sanjida returned home after six months feeling that she had '*escaped from a prison*'. When her parents proposed her to migrate again as a domestic, she was 13 and on the basis of her first experience she initially put up a strong opposition to this new proposal. *My mum asked and I said no, I am not going to go to Dhaka again in my life. I went once, and I didn't get anything, so why would I go*? She got angry with her parents and tried to make sense of their insistence on sending her to Dhaka again. *Then when everybody insisted so much I got angry because I thought that as I was growing up I was becoming a burden for them. If I went away they could survive somehow. As I was growing up they would have had to marry me off and there would have been costs that they could not afford.* She realized that if she stayed home she would not have any chance of attending school and she would just sit without anything to do. So: *you don't want to keep me? ok, I go.*

### 5.3 Footprints of agency and space for self-assertion

As a conclusion to this section we can draw some reflections on the kind of agency and decision making capacity that emerge from the words of the migrant girls when explaining the reasons for their move to Dhaka. First of all, it seems that the so-called 'push-factors' prevail in their narratives. Many of them said that before migrating they could not imagine what the actual work and living conditions would had been and did not have much expectations in terms of what life would have been like in the capital. They vaguely knew about the possibility of earning some money by working in a garment factory from relatives or neighbours who had been or were in Dhaka but none of them was dreaming of it as 'the promised land' where they would fulfil all their hopes. In-fact when we asked the girls if they had realized the expectations they had before migrating most of them seemed not to understand what we were talking about and it was only when we provided some very concrete examples related to earning money, finding a job and so on, that they replied. When we asked them which plans, dreams, hopes they had achieved or not achieved, most of them quoted work related plans, education plans in relation to their siblings education. *My hopes have become true, I thought: I will work and send money home. That hope has been fulfilled. To be honest, I came to work and I managed to do that.* In terms of 'personal' plans girls mentioned mainly the possibility to buy things for themself and in terms of 'other' they mentioned the possibility to help their families.

Actually during some focus group discussion some girls said that the dreams they had

about their life when they were children could not come true precisely because they had to migrate. *It all went upside down. I don't have anymore the dreams I had before migrating. I was hoping to keep studying, to get married, to have a family. But it didn't happen. If there had been in my family someone in charge, I wouldn't have had to come. If I could study, I would have been able to help my younger brothers and sisters. So, I came to work, but I am now unemployed. Doesn't this mean that all my dreams have gone upside down? I hoped to be close to my parents all my life, but not even this dream came true.*

Considering the young age at migration and the actual economic situation of most of our respondents and their experiences prior to migration it not surprising that they saw the choice to migrate almost completely in function of their parents and family well- being. Their objectives and plans were linked in most cases to improving their household' s livelihood by becoming a resource rather than a liability. Most of our Bengali interviewees come from remote rural areas and from villages where migration of young women for work in garment factories is not a widespread phenomenon. The families we visited in the villages of origin of some of the migrants were able to refer to us only 2 or 3 other cases of adolescent girls from the same or nearby villages, who had been or were working in garment factories in the capital or elsewhere. This kind of migration is mainly seen as due to economic necessity: A neighbour of Sharmin's family told us: '*they cannot eat, they earn just enough to eat, they survive mainly on daily labour and they have no land. Educated people have no opportunity of employment because they cannot afford paying bribes*'. '*Adolescent girls should be cared for by their parents. Nowadays the opposite happens, and this is not good.*' People expressed worries about girls' reputation (*man shonman*, honour, prestige) and about the risks of incurring in traffickers. The aunt of a girl who lives in Dhaka said: *we don't know what kind of people they would meet, they risk marrying with someone and then discover after a while that he doesn't have a position, that he is married with someone else.* Dhaka is definitely commonly seen as a dangerous place not suitable for young unmarried girls. In the villages of origin of some of the migrants we also met mixed groups of school students of grade 8 and 9 (approximately 13 to 16 years old) to whom we explained the objectives of the research and asked some questions about their knowledge of the migratory flows involving young people in their area. Probably due to the presence of some of the teachers who insisted to be present, the discussion was far from animated and the students' answers were very typically in line with what they were supposed to say to two outsiders, a foreigner and a researcher coming from the capital, at the presence of their teachers. For example, when asked why they wanted to study and what they wanted to do in the future they said: *we want to contribute to our country's development* and: *we are studying because we want to get a job and be able to stand on our feet*. Despite, this when we asked about adolescent girls migrating to Dhaka for work, what did they thought the reasons were and whether they could think of any relatives or acquaintances that had migrated, their reaction and their brief answers were revealing of the fact that there is shame and loss of prestige and status attached to labour migration to Dhaka, especially if this concerns adolescent unmarried girls. We perceived that our questions were touching very sensitive issues; the few girls who said that they knew someone who had migrated seemed very hesitant in admitting it. Both boys and girls were instead more vocal in telling us about cases of men who had migrated to Malaysia and the Middle East and even proud when they said of relatives who had migrated to Italy. In Birisiri a town in Northern Bangladesh very close to the border with India, where we visited the relatives of some Garo migrants, we were also told by some students that migration is only for those who are so poor that they cannot afford to continue their studies.

It is not surprising in this context that few participants to the research mentioned more individual objectives, and that only a few motivated their migration with wanting to

escape familial pressure and control and/or planned of moving to the capital for good. It is also possible of-course that especially the migrants that we saw only once, for the survey interview, did not want to disclose to us all their motives for migrating but only those they felt more socially acceptable with poverty as the main one. During the FGDs where girls would not talk necessarily about themselves but where they were mainly referring to other girls' stories, this 'less socially acceptable motivations' were more easily mentioned. So for example the need to collect money to pay the dowry for one's marriage was not mentioned among the reasons for migration except than during a FGD. In the same line, during an FGD the girls agreed that: *many came without telling their parents, many came to avoid getting married with someone they did not like. Girls don't like to get married at a very young age, so they came to escape the family pressure.*

In-fact it would not be appropriate for a young girl, especially if still unmarried, to leave one's family of origin on one's own unless this is motivated by economical need. Also intergenerational relationships are framed by a sense of hierarchical love[6] and respect due to parents (and elders) that certainly would make it difficult for a young daughter to express individual preferences and desires and declare wanting to pursue more individual objectives.

Moreover these replies are also consistent with an interpretation of adolescents' psychosocial development that sees adolescents in the process of defining what they want to be and to do with an initial phase where their aspirations in terms of their future social roles are '*vague representations of possible future outcomes based on societal norms and parental expectations*' (Sarah J. Beal and Lisa J. Crockett, 2010:258).

We cannot say, however, that these girls have been forced to migrate, that they have simply complied with a decision taken by someone else or that they have just passively responded to the pressure of the circumstances. I would suggest that they have shown a capacity to evaluate and consider their different possibilities, building on their own experiences and their own perceptions of where their immediate interest lied. As one of them said: *I had the sense to come here when I realized how difficult it was for my parents.* Some others during an FGD said: *parents would not push their daughters to migrate. We came after realizing how bad our family situation was and how much hardship out parents were going through. Nobody told us to come. We came after becoming aware of our parents' difficulties.*

Of course those who had already experienced marriage (and divorce) or had been in school for longer or were older when they moved, expressed the reasons of their migration in a more articulated way while the youngest might give the impression of a less reasoned choice especially if we consider only the brief replies to the survey.

[6] *Bhakti kora* (express devotion) is the Bengali term that best expresses the kind of respect and hierarchical love due to parents and elders by young people, as well as to her husband by a wife, while in return elders, parents and husbands are expected to provide guidance and economic support to their inferiors.

# 6 Being an adolescent migrant

## 6.1 Arriving and settling down in the city: social networks

It is clear from these girls' stories, that social networks are important in the decision making process and subsequently. Relatives, neighbours or acquaintances living or, in some ways, connected to people living or working in the capital had been essential in providing the migrants the concrete opportunity to move by facilitating the journey and/or by offering them a job and/or by helping them to find an occupation at destination. As a girls said during a FGD:

*There are so many people who work here! I came to know from them that here there are work opportunities. I knew someone before coming here, I heard from him/her. So, I thought, if I can get a job I'll be better. In this way someone can get a job through someone who is here already. I didn't know more than this. You cannot come to Dhaka if you don't know someone and usually they are among one's 'attyo swajan'.*

The concept of '*attyo swajan*' as it is commonly used also in rural Bangladesh (Del Franco 2012) deserves some discussion. An individual's *attiyo swajan* can include not only people related by blood or by marriage but also neighbours, people living in the same or a different village, people attending the same school or working in the same office and even people of a different caste or religion. All members of an *attiyo swajan* group are addressed in kinship terms even if there is no affinity or consanguinity. As it is considered very impolite to address anyone by name, people refer to and address others of the same age as 'brother' or 'sister'; and older men/women as 'father' and 'mother', and so on. So an individual may have innumerable brothers and sisters, cousins, in-laws, mothers and fathers. A similar concept is the one of '*apon jon*' commonly used in the slum of Monipur studied by Ahmed (2004). She found that: '*people are more inclined to develop relationships depending on the level of daily interaction. Apon jon is the category they want to have interaction with. People who would do things to help them and make them feel closer*' (Ahmed 2004:121). Ahmed finds that the process of 'adopting' people related neither by blood nor law is linked to the experience of poverty and vulnerability. '*Kinship idiom links and helps people to build material and obligatory relationships to carry out household tasks as well as cope with poverty'* (ibidem:121). The creation of reciprocal obligations through the use of a kinship terminology can also serve to establish a hierarchical relation between a superior and an inferior as between younger and older people, parents and children and so on (Del Franco 2012). Interestingly most of the migrants we interviewed came to Dhaka or got a job through or where living with a '*khala*' (aunt) but in many cases there was no relation of consanguinity or affinity.

All the Bengali migrants had moved from their rural homes directly to the capital city and most of them were still residing in the slum area where they first arrived, but not always with the same people and in the same room/house. Some of those who moved to Dhaka with a relative, or an '*attyio swajan*' after a few months, for different reasons, felt uneasy with his/her family and moved into a rented room alone or with other girls.

Table 10 Current living situation

| | Total | Bengali | Garo |
|---|---|---|---|
| Living alone | 4 | 4 | 0 |
| Living in 'mess' | 3 | 3 | 0 |
| Living with relatives | 15 | 15 | 0 |
| Living with husband children | 18 | 9 | 9 |
| Living with acquaintances | 6 | 6 | 0 |
| Living in BP. hostel | 4 | 0 | 4 |
| Living in shared room | 4 | 4 | 0 |
| Living with parents/siblings | 6 | 6 | 0 |
| Total | *60* | *47* | *13* |

As the table above shows, at the time of the interview 15 migrants were living with relatives and precisely 6 of them with the family (husband and children) of an elder sister or cousin. This is important to notice since we found that those who where living with relatives, especially married sisters and brothers in law, or uncles and aunts felt very much constrained in terms of mobility. As a girl said during and FGD: *if someone touches a girls…it is a question of honour, I could not go anywhere on my own. My aunt would not allow me. I could not even go to buy something. My aunt was saying that I had to behave like I was in the village. In the village I could not talk to anyone, I could not go anywhere alone. I was always under surveillance. My aunt wanted me to behave the same in Dhaka.*

Others who had left their relatives and were now living in shared accommodation or alone, moved because they felt it was inappropriate to share a room with young nephews and some others felt threatened by promiscuous arrangements. The fact that familial networks can become a source of social control for migrant girls was found also by Heissler (2013). In one case we suspected of an abusive relationship between Mina, a young girl and her brother in law.

We met Mina alone in a room where she was living with her brother in law and his young daughter. She told us that her sister was temporarily working in Gazipur (about 1.30 hours from Dhaka) where many garment factories are located and visiting every week-end. Mina could not or did not want to tell us much about her migration story. She was very hesitant in answering our questions and at some point she said that the reason was that she was feeling ashamed. She managed to tell us that she had been forcefully married and that she still is because, despite she left her husband, she does not feel confident enough to face a divorce procedure in court. She could not remember how long she had been in Dhaka for, but a neighbour told us subsequently that she had been brought to Dhaka when she was a child by the same brother in law she was still living with and sent in a family to work as a domestic. She repeated many times how good and caring her brother in law was with her and when at some point he arrived from work, she quickly served him rice and water. She was not working at the time of interview. While we were still talking to her, after her brother in law had left, a neighbour stepped in and in front of her said that actually both her brother and her sister mistreat and are violent and abusive with her. She kept her head down and did not react.

Another kind of accommodation is what is called '*mess*' where one or more girls live with a family and pay them a monthly fixed amount that includes food and accommodation. Some of those who married after migrating, and some of the older migrants, have managed to move to a better area of Pallabi, where both Baunibandh *bustee* and Bhola *bustee* are located. Some of the Garo moved in with relatives or acquaintances initially, but not in slum areas. Most of them underwent a year-long period of training, or more, when they resided in the parlour and received only some pocket money for food expenses.

### 6.2 Living in a *bustee*

Most of the girls reported that, especially soon after arriving at destination, they were badly missing their family in the village, their parents' support and their siblings. This concerned mainly the youngest, never married ones who moved from a situation where felt protected and secure, despite some mobility limitations. The migrants did not say much about the more intimate and emotional aspects of their relation with their parents. Mostly they reported aspects of their daily life before migration and the role their fathers and mothers had in imposing restrictions in their mobility from puberty onwards, and their preoccupations for their daughters' chastity.

*It is very painful to stay here without my parents, but I must stay. We talk on the phone. When I was in the village, I could run to my parents and they would cuddle me ('ador kora'). Here there is no one to cuddle me. I work all day long and still they reproach me.* (FGD)

Overall the migrants felt lost at the beginning in the city.
*When I first arrived I was afraid. I didn't know the streets, nothing. I couldn't go anywhere on my own. I didn't know anything. Now I am not afraid anymore. Now I know everything.* (FGD)

*When I first came, I didn't have money, I bore with lot of hardship. I was getting on with the little money that my sister and her husband were giving me from time to time. I was ashamed to ask, but I didn't have alternatives. Since I found a job, I don't have problems.* (FGD)

*I did not like Dhaka when I first came, because I did not know any road, nothing. I was just going to the factory with my cousin and after work, I returned back to the house with her. I didn't not know anything of Dhaka so I didn't like anything I could not understand the language of the people.* (Ashma)

Since the beginning, girls found it difficult to adjust to the harsh living conditions in a city slum. Most of the young girls we interviewed lived in two *bustee* in Pallabi, in Dhaka city: Bauniabandh and Bhola *bustee*. Bauniabandh was built on government land at the end of the 80s by some NGOs that obtained the land from the state and assigned a small plot to different households. The population of Bauniabandh has increased tremendously over the years while the space available for each family has decreased. Despite promises by the public authorities to give property certificates to the first settlers, this has never formally happened and the status of the households in Baunibandh is still ambiguous even if much more secure than in other *bustees* like the Bhola one where the inhabitants are at constant risk of eviction. In Bauniabandh living condition are much better than in Bhola. There are many NGOs that provide different kind of services beside ARBAN and Terre des Hommes Italy. In the Bhola *bustee* living conditions are worse in terms of clean water, toilet facilities, cooking facilities.

Bauniabandh *bustee*

Bhola *bustee*

The migrants complained about the food they were given in the '*mess*', about the lack of clean water and toilet facilities especially in the Bhola *bustee*, and were concerned about the frequent health problems. In fact many girls have reported having fallen ill after a few months of permanence in Dhaka with jaundice, hepatitis, food poisoning, diarrhoea. Lamia and Nurjahan were living in the Bhola *bustee* when we met them. At arrival in Dhaka, Lamia had been living in a '*mess'* for a few months. *At first I felt very bad after coming to Dhaka, I was crying for home and for mum, coming was very stressful. I had a lot of problems with food, I could not eat the rice they were cooking (in the 'mess'), the vegetable and the lentils were just water, I could not eat the rice, so I ate only bread for 2 months…Now in Bhola bustee there is one toilet for 8 rooms. This makes life very difficult, there is always to wait. Those, like me who work in a factory are lucky because they can use the toilet there.*

*We don't like the electricity blackouts, we have problems with the water…in the slum sometimes we can't get water. In summer it is very hot because of the tin roofs. We feel bad sometimes because we had to leave our dear ones at home…*(Nurjahan)

According to Jamila: *our biggest problem is that we don't have water. Sometimes we have water in the morning and no water for the rest of the day. We don't boil water because gas is expensive.*

In comparing life in the city with life in the village, the migrants underlined the advantage of having the possibility to buy any kind of goods everyday in town, as opposed to having to wait for the weekly *bazar* in the most remote villages. On the other hand in the village they could eat fresh fruit and vegetable and pick them directly from the trees. Some were missing the open fields and the nature while others appreciated precisely the opposite: the crowd and the possibility to mix and meet different kind of people.

### 6.3 Finding a job

There is a wide literature on work conditions in the RMG sector in Bangladesh, discussing in details all the aspects of this type of employment in the factories both in the Export Processing Zones (EPZ) and in smaller and less regulated factories, evaluating the changes and improvements that have occurred over time and the impact on different aspects of the workers well-being (Hossain, 2012).

Without wanting to draw a comprehensive account, here I focus on the perceptions of the girls we interviewed and on the issues that emerged from our conversations with them.

Most of those who migrated to Dhaka with the intentions of working in a garment factory, managed to find a job soon after arrival with the help of some acquaintances. Some who arrived in Dhaka in their early teens had to wait longer before being employed because of their young age, and worked as domestics in the meantime. Some others managed to be employed even if visibly underage and reported that they had to hide in the bathrooms if some visitors came to the factory.

The newly arrived, completely unskilled, are employed as 'helper', after sometime they are promoted to 'sewing machine operator' and only after some years of experience they become 'quality controller'. The work conditions vary from factory to factory in terms of regularity and punctuality in receiving the salary, working hours and remuneration of overtime, possibility of taking leave, and availability of other benefits.

Lamia, in Dhaka since 2007, had been working as quality controller in a factory in Mirpur. She said she was lucky because in her factory they treated her well even if her daily routine was quite physically demanding: including overtime she worked from 8 in the morning to 10 in the evening with one hour lunch break for a salary of about 12000 taka (150 dollars) per month (including the overtime pay).

Sharmin recalls how difficult her first few months of work had been: *I was standing up from 8 a.m. to 11 pm, spinning thread ('suta kata') and doing other tasks. Then I would go to my cousin's home. After reaching the house, I would help my cousin to cook and do household chores. I was with her for 6/7 months doing this. I stayed with my cousin for 7 months, my salary was 1260 taka (16 dollars) or something like that. I gave money to my cousin for food, I was spending the money to buy soap and oil, I couldn't save a single penny for myself. I was just earning enough to eat and sustain myself. Then I got sick with jaundice and I went back home for some time.*

Nurjahan was one of those who said that in some respect her living condition had worsened after migration: *My health got much worse than before. We have to work a lot, from morning to night. Sometimes we have to do night shifts. We don't sleep enough. At work there is a lot of pressure and no time to relax, not even to go to the toilet. We have one-hour lunch break from 1 to 2 pm. We are insulted badly all the time. If I knew I wouldn't have come.*

After some years of work, with the acquisition of some skills and the promotion from helper to machine operator, workers obtain a salary increment and their working and living conditions improve. They can afford to send money at home but they still have to make sacrifices in terms of their own consumption. There has been recent legislative interventions in favour of garment workers. After the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013, the minimum wage has been increased, the level of security raised and more controls have been put in place in the factories (although it is difficult to say if in all of them). However, as happened to two of our respondents, small factories may open and close in the space of a few months, leaving workers overnight without a job and without any compensation. We learnt from the girls that, without doing overtime, the salary of a machine operator amounts to more or less 6000 taka, 2500 to 3000 have to be spent for food and accommodation. Those who send remittances manage to send 2000 to 3000 monthly. So, there is not much left for oneself or for savings. Many girls complain of being mistreated and reprimanded often and are aware that because of the huge labour supply in the sector, they can lose their job any time if they don't comply with their work environment and conditions.

*When you work in a garment factory, if you are late they reproach you, they insult you, they don't pay you regularly. They give you a daily target, you have to make from 100 to 200 pieces. If you can't they reproach you.* (Nurjahan)

When Lamia asked for a day of leave to accompany us to her village when we visited her mum she was told: *if you don't come to work on that day, you might as well not to come anymore.*

The situation of Garo migrants in beauty parlours is also quite variable, depending on many factors. Big, more structured parlours ensure better working conditions. A newly arrived worker will have to bear with a period of apprenticeship where she will be given just enough to cover food costs, she won't have holidays and will have to live in the parlour or the hostel attached. Usually the workers have a day off during the week and 4-5 days holiday in the Christmas period, when they can go home. In the small parlour where most of the girls I interviewed work, they can be asked to give up the weekly holiday or the Christmas leave if there have very big jobs, such as a wedding, or any sudden need by friends of the owner.

From the answers to the survey questionnaire it emerges that 44 (31 Bengali and 13 Garo) out of 60 interviewees consider their present working and living condition better than before they migrated. In particular: for 45 of them, there has been an improvement from the economic point of view; earning a salary, even if low, allows them to cover their basic daily expenses for food and accommodation (47), to contribute to support their families back home (33), and to provide education to some of their younger siblings (12) or children (3).

The overall situation is however much more nuanced. The following are abstracts from the FGD conducted in one of AB centres with 10 migrants, all residing in the Bhola slum. Jamila talks of some improvements: *Yes, there has been some improvements: before I could eat one day and I had to starve for two, now it's not like that, now I send money also to my parents and they can*

*eat too. My two younger brothers can go to school and they can also attend some events at the school, even if they have to contribute with some money.*

Nurjahan acknowledges that if her target was to help the family, that objective has been achieved but on the other hand, her own life is worse than before: *I thought that, by working, I would have been able to send money home. That hope has been fulfilled. Actually, I came to work and I am working so that hope is fulfilled…but I am worse than before, I can't see my parents and my brothers and sisters...If I stayed my life could have been better, I could have studied…*

Halima: *I just understand one thing: now I can eat twice a day. I can pay the room rent. I don't do anything else.*

### 6.4 Social life in Dhaka: opportunities and risks

After sometime, some of the migrants begin to appreciate some aspects of the social life in the capital:

*Whenever I wanted I could go to the market. When I felt bad I could go to the cinema hall to watch movies with my friends. That means there was no one to impose restrictions upon me. At home, my parents were saying: you can't go here or you can't go there, but here in Dhaka I can go to the cinema hall to watch movie and I walk to the factory with my friends. I like it* (Sharmin).

*We like Dhaka because we can meet different kind of people, we like to go to the cinema...the children's park...the botanical garden. We like Dhaka even more because we can make money* (Nurjajan).

*In Dhaka I can walk, mix with a lot of people. I like it. More than anything else I like the freedom* (FGD).

We can say that most young migrant girls perceive the opportunities as well as the disadvantages and dangers of living and working in the capital. Dhaka is seen as a place where there are multiple occasions of encounter, where different kind of goods are easily accessible, where it is possible to enjoy more freedom of movement because parents are not there to control and forbid. Girls do actually go to visit some of Dhaka attractions, the botanical garden and the children's park, and they go to watch movies at the cinemas. One of their favourite means of entertainment is to go to the market and buy cosmetics and dresses. On the other hand as many have said, especially for those who have just arrived and are at the lowest level of the pay scale in the factory, the salary is just enough to cover one's basic expenses and provide for the family back home. As Jamila powerfully said: *Sometimes I would like to eat something nice but I can't, If I spend money for myself I will not be able to send money home, so I think that here I can eat in one way or the other but at home if I don't send money they would starve.* The reality is that most of them spend their time between 'office', as they call the factory, and their room in the slum, because of the long working hours and the lack of free time, because they are tired, or because they cannot afford going anywhere for lack of money.

The Garo migrants, at arrival, are somewhat in a better situation, especially those who join relatives in different parts of Dhaka, who had been living in the capital for long time and whose economic situation tends to be less precarious. For those who cannot count on already established social networks in the city, accommodation is usually provided at work premises. Big saloons have their own hostels, while smaller ones accommodate the girls in the parlour itself. Girls are given a small monthly amount to cover the food costs, sleep

on the floor of one of the rooms and prepare their own food in a small kitchen. This period of apprentice can last for one to two years. Considering that some Garo move to Dhaka hoping to be able to fund their studies through work, finding themselves in a situation where they can hardly go out from a place where they live, and working for up to 10 hours a day every day of the week, can be frustrating.

As Shopna, 15 years old, said: *When I first arrived, I didn't like anything. I had to leave my parents, alone I didn't enjoy anything, I was missing my brothers and sisters, I was not used to live alone. I had never cooked for myself so I didn't like it. I'd like to go back home. I miss being and playing with my friends. I don't like Dhaka, I feel like being in a zoo, in a prison. I have no freedom, no holidays. I can't walk around, I don't have time for myself. I though I would get one day holiday at some point and on that day I would go out…I was hoping that in Dhaka I would have been able to study at Open University and work…Until now that hope did not come true, but I still have that desire.* Shopna, in fact, went back home after about one year in Dhaka and enrolled again at school at the end of 2014. In November 2015 after obtaining the SSC, she was considering moving again to Dhaka again to earn some money to continue studying.

### 6.5 Developing friendships and relationships

*They are shy at the beginning, they don't talk and don't go out much, then they buy a mobile phone and their life starts.*

This quote from a FGD with a group of men and women who had been living in Bauniabandh slum since its foundation exemplifies a common view about the situation of newly arrived migrant girls in the slum. Once they buy a mobile phone they start widening their social network and they overcome the initial fears and shyness. Implicit in this comment is also that through virtual social networks girls risk somehow to become too smart and engage in 'illegal' relationships with boys or men. The situation is in reality much more nuanced and contradictory than this. Not all the migrants can afford buying a mobile phone and many of those who can, cannot afford a smart phone. Most migrants use the phone just for normal phone calls and don't use the Internet. Despite this, it is true that mobile phones have made a difference in the life of Bangladeshi teenagers, migrants and non-migrants and have become an essential means of communication through which different kind of relationships can develop.

Friendships easily develop between girls who work in the same factory or live together in a '*mess*', or share a room in the slum. They visit each other in the respective houses and, despite the limitations discussed above, those who can spare some money enjoy going to buy cosmetics and dresses with friends. Profound affective friendly relationships may also develop that become sources of support in times of need. Lamia for example acknowledged with gratitude, Suma's economic help during her sister's illness. The two friends have recently migrated together to Oman, after sharing a room in the Bhola *bustee* for 5 years.

Friendships and relationships with boys are also potentially 'easier' in Dhaka than in the villages.

*In Dhaka we have more opportunities to mix with boys. There is more freedom since our parents are not here. We have occasions to talk to boys. For example, say that I am a helper (unskilled worker) in a factory and next to me there is a boy who also works as a helper. Then there are machine operators, input officers, all of them are boys. We talk freely to them...we can also flirt with them.* (Jamila)

Girls and boys have more occasions and spaces for encounter than in the villages and the use of mobile phones is an important means for getting in touch, and starting a relationship. However the apparent ease with which is possible to entertain phone conversations is counterbalanced by the strong social control present in the slum, even if in forms different from the village. It is very difficult to develop and live cross-gender friendships since every contact between unrelated boys and girls is seen as potentially leading to sexual relationships and as such has to be censored. The fear of losing one's face and reputation with behaviours that are contrary to the recognised social norms is quite strong, as well as a preoccupation with keeping intact one's good name among relatives and villagers back home.

*If they know that a girl earns 5000 taka (64 dollars) per month the people in my village would say: 'she must be a prostitute'. That's what they think, That's why we don't have any more a good reputation in the village. We can't talk to anyone with our head up, we have to talk keeping own head down.* (Lamia)

It is understandable that most of the girls we talked to declared that the main reason they came to Dhaka was to work to help their families and that they are not interested in any forms of entertainment. They smiled and giggled when we asked them if they had boyfriends but the majority admitted only to phone conversations with someone. There is also widespread mistrust in boys/men and fears of being cheated by young and older suitors. This is in many cases justified by girls' own or others' experiences.

As Lamia said: *In Dhaka…relationships with boys…there is a different 'system'. Actually they don't have relationships...they just pass their time. After sometime you will realize that they are married and they have children at home, but they flirt, just to enjoy.*

Another girl said that boys run after girls who have money and that they don't consider those who live in the slums: *The bad thing is that this is a slum environment, the good thing is that boys would not disturb girls who live in the slum because they would think that these girls are dirty and that there is no advantage in mixing with slum people.*

As a consequence, most of the migrant girls we talked to do not openly take advantage of the potential opportunities that Dhaka might offer and tend to keep a very restrained attitude. One of them during a FGD also said that she is looking forward to going back home because in Dhaka there is too much freedom '*shadinota*'. We were told the same by Halima, who repeatedly told us that she was spending her days between her room and the factory with no interest and trust in colleagues and neighbours: *Life in the village was good. Here people don't talk to each other. Nobody would say anything to a girl who goes home at 10 -11 in the night. In the village it's not like this, it doesn't work like this. In the village there are people who check on you, here there aren't.*

Others do engage in more or less secret contacts and intimacies. Some 'love stories' have all the characteristics of a secret, contrasted, romantic engagement like those seen in TV romantic movies and comedies. Songs, movies and comedies provide teenagers with the language of 'romantic love' to voice their feelings and give meaning to their clandestine encounters.

Rita and Sanjit for example have been 'in love' for about 2 years during which the met only twice. The boy's father disapproves of their relationship and tried to separate them, first by arranging Sanjit's marriage with someone else and then by sending him to work abroad. Rita is divided between fulfilling her love dreams and trying to help her family. In

the first occasion we met Rita she was happy and said that her family was better too after her migration. She said that she wouldn't have been able to advance so much in her life if she stayed with her parents. When we talked to her again, after a few months she was worried and concerned about the future, she also cried while telling us that she didn't know whether to try to pursue her 'love story' or focus on her work and try to help her family back home.

We know about Sanjt only through Rita's words but from what she says his plans are also quite confused since in the space of few months he changed his mind many times: first under Rita' s pressure he promised he would go back to University, then he accepted to go to Malaysia and wanted to take Rita with him (which is not possible), finally he pretended to have lost his passport and started working in a pharmaceutical company in Chittagong from where he insisted to marry as soon as possible.

Rita told us that when she was in the village, a boy used to run after her but at that time she was too young to understand what love is. After some time in Dhaka, however: *now I understand what love is. I learned from the movies that if you love someone you don't mind giving up your life for him. You would do anything for him, now I understand...I love Sanjit I would give for him the last drop of my blood.*

*Sanjit told me:' If I have to live without you, then I shall leave this world' and I told him that in that case there would be only darkness in this world for me, all the light would go away with him. I told him: I have understood, if we have to live we will live together, if we have to die, we will die together, don't go anywhere leaving me; I have none but you in my life.*

In contrast, Shamima is an example of a fulfilled and we might say more mature 'love story'. She married at destination after overcoming her and her husband's parent's opposition. These marriages are usually labelled as 'love marriages' because the bride and the groom, rather than their parents/relatives take the initiative in arranging the marriage. In these cases the migrant settles in Dhaka or were the in-laws reside. Shamima believes that things are changing with respect to premarital relationships and marriage arrangements and talks positively about her own experience:

*Now is the mobile phone era, there is internet, now is not an issue, now much flirting happens through 'wrong number*[7]*' Before nothing like this used to happen. There were not mobile phones, people used to write letters, now nobody does…Most of the times the guardians decide about someone's marriage but nowadays there are more love marriages, this is the 'era of love'.*

The increase in the number of 'love' marriages is perceived and has been mentioned by both adult and young people in the slums (as well as elsewhere). In people's common view, what is called 'love marriage' (*premer biye*) is opposed to 'arranged' marriage which is the dominant culturally sanctioned form of conjugal union. There is no precise Bengali term for the word 'arranged' but the most common verb used in discussions of marriage, to 'give in marriage' (*biye dewa*) conveys clearly the idea that the two spouses do not take the initiative in deciding when and who to marry. The alternative verb (*biye korbo*, literally 'I will marry'*)* is also used, but much less frequently. A marriage where the parents take the initiative is considered to be a 'proper' one. When a couple decides to get married without consulting the parents, it is said that they 'marry on their own' *nijer biye kora* or that they married after eloping *palaye bye kora.* In most cases 'love marriages', like

[7] When a boy sees a girl he likes and manages to get her phone number from some mutual acquaintance, he calls her pretending to have called a wrong number and tries to start a conversation Girls might do the same if they spot on the road a boy they like.

Shamima's are accepted and ratified by parents. The wedding ceremony does not follow a period of engagement where the couple meets, develops intimacy and reciprocal knowledge. This is contrary to social norms that prohibit any form of contact between unmarried boys and girls an explains also why relationships like Rita's can last for months with almost no encounter, just through phone conversations while other so-called 'love marriages' may happen a few days after the first casual encounter on the road like in the case of Alma. She told us: *He liked me after seeing me in the street. He was a neighbour. My aunt did not want me to get married with someone who lived so close. She did not agree. So we married on our own (nijera bye korci). I came to Dhaka at 14 and I worked for 4-5 years. I think I was 18 when I got married.*

In the slums there are no places where young people can meet in groups either for some kind of entertainment or simply to spend time together. Friendships between unrelated boys and girls are seen with suspicion and whatever happens in the narrow lanes of the slums is under the public gaze. In a slum as well as in a rural village there is no-privacy and no space for intimate relationships to develop. To avoid being seen by their neighbours young couples may meet along the main road not far from Bauniabandh slum where some stalls that sell snacks and tea are located but even here there is no guarantee of not being seen (see Kamila's case below). So, mobile phones have an important role in courtship and flirting. The 'wrong number' technique is widely used to get in touch with someone after spotting him or her in the street. As we were told: '*it works like this: if a boy sees a girl he likes in the street he tries to get her number from the neighbours or from the stall where she normally goes to recharge her phone. Then he calls her and pretends that he called a wrong number. If he understands that she might be available to talk he starts asking her questions and ask her if she want to be his friend.* Interestingly even girls may take the initiative to get the number and call.

Besides Shamima's (and others) 'happy ending', and beside platonic flirting and playful courtship, the stories of the young migrants we interviewed show also, in line with their own preoccupations about the predatory behaviour of young men, the risks and problems they face, some of which they share with non migrant adolescent.

Kamila, who was born in Bauniabandh slum, was forced to get married at 16 to a boy she had been going out with for a while. She had been caught twice in the company of her 'boyfriend' in an open area where young people use to meet for tea and snacks, by a group of young neighbours. The gang forced them to get married, after demanding that her parents pay some monetary compensation for the damage to the neighbourhood's prestige due to Kamila's illicit behaviour. After two years Kamila decided to divorce her husband and managed to do that only with the support of a local NGO who acted as a mediator with her parents and the local 'leaders'.

Shanti, a migrant, also was forcefully married. At 14-15 she migrated to Dhaka: *I came because we were poor, to help my parents. But I could not help them because I got married.* About one month after she reached Dhaka, a relative of the family that was hosting her 'saw' her and stalked her until they married. *We married because there had been trouble, he was waiting for me at work, and he was following me on the way to and from work. So without telling my parents, people in the neighbourhood got us married. Now my parents are in trouble, my father cannot work, my brother doesn't work and my sisters are little. I cannot help them.*

Jamila, a migrant, still bears the consequences of her 'rebellious' attitude. In Dhaka, in the first months of 2014, she was learning hip hop in a dance club that turned out to be a recruitment place for girls to be sent to work in 'night clubs' and probably also to be trafficked to work in brothels out of the country. After some episodes that convinced her

uncle and brother that she was at risk of becoming a sex-worker and being trafficked to India by the people she met in the club, her brother took her back home. She lived for some months under constant surveillance and was forbidden to use the mobile phone to prevent her from getting in touch with her acquaintances in the club.

Some migrants who married at destination also report negative experiences. Jaya is approximately 32 years old and left her village about 14 years ago with her 2 years old daughter after her husband remarried and had a child from his second wife. Jaya's parents wanted her to leave her daughter with them and remarry but she decided instead to move to Dhaka.

*I didn't know anything and I didn't know any one but when my parents decided that I had to marry again and that they would take care of my daughter I said that I would never leave her and that I would never remarry… When I arrived in Dhaka, I didn't have a house, I didn't have money, I didn't know where to go…so I married and I had two sons. I married him 3-4 days after I arrived in Dhaka, he gave me money, and in this way he got hold of me.*

At arrival, Jaya met a man who offered to help her and married him. She is now working as a daily labourer breaking bricks, she doesn't have the strength to work every day and her daughter, who is now approximately 16, is de facto the main bread-winner of the family that includes also 2 young boys (8 and 11 years old) born from Jaya's second marriage. Jaya's second husband still lives in Dhaka but with a new wife and he doesn't look after Jaya and her sons.

Monira plainly said that the man whom she married and divorced in Dhaka after she came back from 3 years in Lebanon was only interested in her savings.

These findings resonate with the general account in section 2 of the social context of the slums and the particular kind of vulnerabilities that concern adolescent girls and single young migrant women. As we will discuss in section 7, there are differences between younger and older migrants and between those who have been married and the unmarried ones in how they are positioned in society. As a consequence there are differences in the more or less wide room for manoeuvre they have in managing their lives and dealing with social norms and obligations.

I have to underline here that what has been discussed so far in this section concerns only the Bengali migrants. All the Garo married migrants had instead married after migrating with men they met at destination, or with old boyfriends. Garo society is matri-local and matrilineal. Marriages used to be arranged and the family of the bride had much more negotiating power than the husband's. Nowadays, however, especially those who live in Dhaka, marry whom they chose and parents, most of the time, just ratify the decision. Two of our respondents had married a Muslim man.

### 6.6 Supporting the left behind

More than two-thirds of the migrants we interviewed (45 of which 35 Bengali and 10 Garo) have left either both parents, or one of them and some siblings behind in the village of origin. Five migrants (4 Bengali and 1 Garo) left behind their own children, who are living either with their parents or their in laws. Nine migrants do not have any close family member left in the village of origin. This is the case of 4 girls who left behind

cousins and 5 girls whose siblings and parents (sometimes only one of them) have all moved to Dhaka, following one of their children.

Table 11 Remittances

| | Total | Bengali | Garo |
|---|---|---|---|
| Currently sending | 33 | 26 | 7 |
| Not sending but sent | 10 | 7 | 3 |
| Never sent | 17 | 14 | 3 |
| | ***60*** | ***47*** | ***13*** |

As we can see from the table above a little more than half of the respondents were supporting some family members in the village when we met them. Those who were not sending remittances included:

a) The youngest migrants who had arrived in the capital only a few months before we interviewed them, who were not in the condition of sending money home, either because they did not work yet (5 of them) or because they earned very little money.
b) Older migrants like Jaya, who hardly earns enough to support herself and her 3 children, and have never sent remittances.
c) Respondents who belong to households whose members over time have joined those who had initially migrated to Dhaka and now all live in Dhaka: for example young girls followed first by their sisters, and then by a widowed or divorced mother or by both parents.
d) Girls who decided to migrate to escape abusive situations and conflict with a step-parent and who do not want to send remittances.
e) Older migrants, settled in Dhaka, who used to send remittances and do not do it anymore either because don't have anyone left back home or because they have stopped working and live out of the husband' s earnings.

According to Bengali social norms, with marriage a woman is supposed to become part of her husband's family and does not have any responsibility towards her own. Interestingly, however, many migrant girls said that their parents could not count at all on their married brothers even though these are the ones who should be responsible for their old parents and younger siblings.

Some migrants, like Lamia, and Sangjida, and Rita have decided to postpone their own marriage to be able to help their parents and younger siblings in their studies.

*The situation after marriage is different, then I will belong to someone else, I will depend on someone else. Then I will have to do what my husband says. After marriage if my husband allows me to work, I will, otherwise I won't. If I can't work, then I will not be able to help my family. I won't be able to help my mother and to pay for my sister' study. That's why I don't get married. If I did my mum and sister would be in trouble. That's why I came to Dhaka: so that my sister will be able to do what I couldn't do. First I will educate my sister. It's my decision.* (Lamia)

Garo social norms about the responsibilities of grown-up children are different. They frequently keep supporting their parents even after they have married. The newly wed Garo couple usually settles on its own in town and in laws usually live in the village. In the case of Garo, long-term migration has visibly changed the villages of origin. In some of them every household has one or more members who have migrated either to Dhaka or to other towns and the flow of remittances has been substantial. Brick houses have been

built in the villages of origin where in some cases only the elderly reside for most of the year.

From the table below we can see that two thirds of the interviewees, 39 (31 Bengali and 8 Garo) claimed that their family of origin's condition had improved[8].

Table 12 Condition of family of origin

| | Total | Bengali | Garo |
|---|---|---|---|
| Improved | 39 | 31 | 8 |
| Did not improve | 13 | 11 | 2 |

If we look at the following table, we see that 35 migrants claimed that the improvement was economic, but it must be noted that those who mentioned an improvement in the economic situation of their family referred almost exclusively to an increased capacity to cover basic daily expenses and health emergencies. In spite of the fact that most of the migrants claimed that their objective for the future was to save enough money to invest in assets at origin (e.g. in land) there is not much evidence from older Bengali migrants that they have been able to do this.

Table 13 How the condition of family of origin improved

| | | Total | Bengali | Garo |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Economically | 35 | 28 | 7 |
| 2 | Education | 19 | 16 | 3 |
| 3 | Social status | 8 | 8 | |
| 4 | Possibility to respond to emergencies | 7 | 6 | 1 |
| 5 | Other | 5 | 4 | 1 |

It is significant that in 19 cases the improvement concerns the education of siblings or children left behind and this may improve the longer-term prospects of these families.

[8] Three Garo migrants could not answer the question because they had not been in Dhaka enough to earn money and to be able to send remittances. 5 Bengali girls did not answer either because they had not been in Dhaka long enough or because they did not have anyone they felt responsible for at home.

## 7 Transitions and intersections

So far we have discussed some aspects of the migrant girls' lives before they migrated and at destination and we have provided an account of the opportunities and constraints they face as adolescent migrants. We have seen the extent to which as very young adolescents their objectives, life plans and motivations for migration were embedded in their childhood social relations. In this section, we'll try to understand how the spatial transition of migration and their experiences at destination have intersected with the personal and social process of transition to adulthood. We look first at how migration has changed girls' self-perception and the perception of the space they occupy in their social and familial networks.

Sanjida' s words provide insights on how migration can intersect with a process of personal growth and development of self-identity. We have already seen that Sanjida migrated for the second time to Dhaka as a domestic worker at around 13. She did it unwillingly and under the pressure of her family. This second experience however turned out much more positive than the first one. This was mainly because of the relationship that Sanjida established with her employer who realized how upset Sanjida was for leaving her parents and family behind, and tried since the beginning to console her. *She made me sit next to her and said: 'listen, you are small and new here, stay for a few days and if you don't like it you can leave. We heard about your situation and we felt bad that's why I told your brother to bring you over'. She talked to me sitting very close and touching my head and I liked it, I listened a lot to her words, I haven't heard from anyone such words before, she said very sweet words and after listening to her I felt very good.*

The kindness of her new employer and their relationship made Sanjida to reflect on her relationship with her own parents. *I understood what people mean when they say that a mother is everything for her children. I thought that, I never got from my mum what I also consider being the kind of care you receive from a mother. One reason for that could be that my mum was worried because we didn't have anything. Also she had a lot of children, whom she would take care of? Whom she would keep close? How? In a village people don't care about that, intimate thoughts, people are not used to talk friendly to children, to give them advise about what is good and bad. I understand now that I was not used to talk about those things with my parents.*

While Sanjida' s father seemed to be a very distant presence in her childhood, her mum was the one who was delimiting boundaries and disciplining her. *When I had my period my mum was reproaching me all the time saying that as I was a grown-up and I could not go here and there, that I couldn't play as I used to do before, or mix with people; I had to stay at home as much as I could and do housework or else people would say bad things...this and that. No you cannot go...but she wouldn't say why. How and from whom could we learn? My father's problem was 'different' you don't even feel like asking your father. If we talked we would talk with our mother not with our father. When I was at home I was a very shy girl and very introverted, so much that I was afraid of everybody.*

*…Time passed slowly, my 'auntie' was giving me advise: 'now in our society many girls improve the economic situation of their parents, they work outside and if you want you can also do like that'. I said: how can I? I didn't study, so how can I get a job? 'You don't have to worry about that, if you decide that you want to do something for your family, if you believe in yourself of course you will be able to do something'.*

Even when at 15-16 both her auntie and her parents thought that it was time that Sanjida's got married she refused and decided that she would rather keep working and helping her family. *When I was 15-16 and they wanted me to marry, I said that I didn't want to*

*marry, I wanted to work. I wanted to work and with the money that the 'auntie' was giving me every month I could somehow find out a way to improve my family's situation, but I needed more time. My sisters were still little, one was in class 3 and one in class 4-5, so there were costs for their education, I could save all the money she gave me because I didn't have any expenses, so with that money I was helping my family and my idea was that I would bring my family to a better position. I wouldn't marry, I would work.*

Finally Sanjida found a good job in an NGO and since then she supports her family and in particular her younger sister's schooling.

*Then after joining that office almost 8 years had passed, I started with a salary of 2000 taka, now my salary is 12000 taka and something more, my family is fine. One of my sisters passed the intermediate exam, found a job and probably she will keep studying. My family is more or less in a good situation. They get more support from me than from my elder brother. They respect me so much that, as I took responsibility for the whole family, they feel they have to do according to my will. It goes on in this way: they do what I say without complaining and they never asked: you are a woman, why do you talk? My situation now is good, after I found a job there has been a lot of improvement in my family situation in my personal situation, from all points of view.*

In Sanjida's case the good relationship she established with her employer has been essential for the development of her self esteem and she has became assertive enough to refuse to marry and pursue with great determination her objectives. In another occasion she told me that she felt that her parents were now treating her as a boy. In-fact she has been assuming responsibilities towards her family of origin that commonly concern only male members of the household. In 2011 when one of her younger sisters disappeared from home the whole family turned to her for help. She travelled home from Dhaka and once it had been ascertained that her sister had eloped with a boy and married him and had not been kidnapped, Sanjida convinced everyone that despite her mistake, her sister and her husband should not be ostracized despite the loss of prestige they caused to the family. It must be stressed though that Sanjida could and still can play this role in her family because she is unmarried. She is aware of this and only recently she has started thinking that '*may be I have done enough for my parents and sisters and it's now time for me to think at myself*'. Being still unmarried at 27, however she has somehow 'missed' the right moment to get married, that, if she stayed in the village would have been around 15-16 years of age. She is now in the difficult position of having become the head of her own family of origin but with scarce chances of building her own.

According to the survey for about two thirds of the migrants migration and work had a positive impact on their sense of self-hood and self-esteem, on their mobility and on an increased decision making power in their daily life. Some migrants expressed this sense of personal growth in terms of an increased capacity 'to understand' (*bujha*). This is an important concept that can be understood as the knowledge that derives from experience and the consequent ability to perform one's duties and behave according to social norms but also as the capacity to assume adult responsibilities.

As a village girl who had just arrived in town Tasmina felt lost: *I am a village girl. I didn't know anything. At that time I didn't know anything. I was afraid, I got lost, I was standing in the street and crying.* As a working woman who can support her parents she now 'understands' and like Sanjida she is in the position of deciding that she wants to postpone her marriage. *Now, you have to consider that I work independently, I stand on my own feet, I earn money, I can help my parents. Now I understand everything. I will not marry now, a bit later, it's not time now. I want to keep working.*

Ashma: *I understand much more now than before. When I arrived I didn't know anything. I had to ask a colleague what was the value of the banknotes of my first salary. She told me: 'don't tell any one that you don't know otherwise they will give you one hundred notes and say they are 500's'…But now, by living here I am more clever…Now I can mix with people, Now I understand…In the village I was like a fool, Now I understand the nature of the people I meet.*

Kotalova (1993), Blanchet (1996) and White (2002) all argue that what distinguishes adults from non-adults is not their age but rather their capacity to 'understand' and thus to be subject to different '*entitlements and types, levels of responsibility*' (White, 2002: 728). There are thus different degrees of understanding that do not necessarily correspond to particular ages. To be able to find one's way in the streets of Dhaka, to work, to earn, use, invest, save or send money home, to be able to negotiate with one's employer, all these entail the acquisition of different degrees of 'understanding' and of a capacity to assume adult responsibilities.

On the one hand when parents say about an obedient and respectful child that he or she 'understands', '*bujha*' seems to imply conformity: the knowledge and respect of social norms and the capacity to adhere to and behave according to social expectations. On the other hand, when understanding is related to working, being able to live in Dhaka without one's parents while keeping intact one's reputation, it means also to be able to manage one's life and act in one's interests. It presupposes the individual capacity to assume responsibilities in different domains and activities, not necessarily according to what the hegemonic gender norms prescribe. It is associated then not only with the adherence to social obligations but also to the ability to negotiate them and exercise a degree of agency.

It seems that migration has positively affected a process of personal growth that is much more visible for those migrants who have been more successful in terms of work and earning and those who have been residing in Dhaka for longer. Plans for the future have also become more defined and realistic: for 3 young women, Lamia and Monira and Salma who despite initial and current difficulties, have managed to save some money and establish a good network of 'friends' migration abroad has become an option. It is significant the determination with which Lamia pursued her decision to migrate abroad. She couldn't see any good future prospects by working in a garment factory in Dhaka and decided to migrate abroad where she hoped to earn more and be able to save money, buy some asset in her home village for her and her mother to live on. Before moving to Oman she said: '*the decision has been taken, if I die I will die abroad, If I live I will live abroad*'. Her plan is now to stay in Oman for at least 2 years and then go back to the village and settle there.

When it comes to another important aspect of the transition to adulthood, establishing cross gender intimate contacts and getting married we found diverse experiences and situations. We have already seen the complex situation for what concerns premarital relationships among adolescents, a sort of parallel world partially hidden to adults where young migrants experiment with their enhanced capacity to 'understand' in relation to sexual attraction and different kinds of 'love'.

Migration also intersects with marriage and marriage choices in different ways. First of all we can say that migration can contribute to the postponing of marriage. All the unmarried migrants expressed their intention to get married in the future, and to do it in their village of origin, according to their parents' choice. Some of them also mentioned a time span of 2 to 5 years. Quoting Tasmina again: *Now I stand on my feet, I like to work, now I understand everything. It's not time to marry yet. When the right time will come my parents will be there. When they*

*will say it's time, I'll marry*. Even if the migrants said that they expected their parents to arrange their marriage, they also said that they wanted to wait long enough to be able to save some money from their work. Some of them claimed that if they hadn't migrated they would have probably been already married. In rural areas when a girl reaches puberty and stops going to school, the preferred choice would be for her parents to find a suitable partner and marry her while she is young enough not to have to pay a big amount of dowry, but the stories we collected suggest that migration for work may constitute for poor parents a possible alternative to marrying their daughters in their early teens.

Secondly in some cases we found that a failed marriage together with the lack of economic resources of the family of origin is among the triggers of migration for young women. As we described earlier a divorce/separation, even if the girl is not responsible for it, brings shame and damages the reputation of the girl and of the girl' s family and diminishes the chances of a second marriage in the same area. Migration thus becomes a means of escaping the social stigma and increases the probability of remarriage for the girl. Once in Dhaka she can easily pretend to be unmarried. Moreover in this way, a divorced woman can become an asset rather than a liability for the family of origin. Some of those who migrated after a failed marriage, however, did not seem so eager to find a new marriage partner. Like Lamia, some of them were afraid that they wouldn't been able to support their families anymore and some of them were resigned to the fact that their life had already gone in the wrong direction and wanted instead to be able to help their younger siblings. Also, some of the older migrants especially were well aware of the negative experiences of some women who had re-married in Dhaka. They were afraid to be spoiled and cheated by a new husband and for this reason ruled out the possibility of marrying again.

Thirdly we found cases of migrants who married after migration with someone they met at destination. These marriages were usually labelled as 'love marriages' because the bride and the groom, rather than their parents/relatives took the initiative in arranging the marriage. I have already mentioned a few cases like these among the Bengali migrants. Some of these marriages happen sometime after the first encounter and entail negotiations between the respective families. Some others, like those of Jaya and Shima, may follow an occasional meeting on the way to the factory or somewhere in the slum. According to Jaya and Shima they had each decided to accept a marriage proposition soon after their arrival in Dhaka, just because they felt in need of protection. Drawing together these different scenarios it seems that marriage and marriage choices assume a different value and have different characteristics in the lives of the migrants we interviewed according to their age and position in the life course and their marital status at migration.

First of all, marriage retains its importance as a social institution and is perceived as a fundamental step in everyone's life trajectory. Listening to the words of the youngest unmarried migrants it is clear the extent to which they foresee getting married as the main short term objective in their lives, only temporarily subordinated to earning an income and contributing to their family's livelihood. Both the migrants and their parents are aware that especially for women of low socio-economic background waiting too much might mean not to be able to get married. The oldest a woman is the biggest is the amount of money that has to be paid as dowry to the husband's family, let alone the risks for her reputation. Sanjida's example shows that becoming 'adult' and independent to the point of being *de facto* the head of one's family of origin might entail remaining single up to 27 years of age and this is a trade off that might not be worth pursuing.

The situation differs for young women who migrate to Dhaka after a failed marriage. They are not anymore considered and they don't anymore consider themselves as '*meye*' (girls), with marriage they had become '*mohila*' (adult women). In some ways they have already fulfilled a social and religious obligation by having been married at least once and even if a second marriage would be desirable, they feel confident and legitimated to have different objectives, such as supporting their old parents or helping their younger siblings in their studies. Lamia, for example, after divorcing her husband and losing the guardianship of her daughter, repeatedly stressed that she prefers to look after her mother rather then marrying again in order to secure her mother and herself a better future. After the fieldwork had ended she migrated to Oman where she can earn and save more than by working in Dhaka. Her plan is now to buy some assets in her village of origin and look after her mother and her sister's child.

Yet, for some migrants having a husband is still the best possible choice. Sharmin migrated after divorcing from a violent, abusive husband. Even though she enjoyed many aspects of her life in Dhaka without him, at some point, under pressure from her parents she went back to him. Her parents were insisting that otherwise she would have had to get married with someone else but this would have implied for Sharmin not being able to take care of her son. She has become the main breadwinner and the one whose income materially supports the whole family, but Sharmin describes her husband as '*a shadow over her head*', by which we understand that having a husband is a way to be able to retain guardianship over and take care of her son: that he is a protector. Other young migrants approved Sharmin's choice, saying that young women need a husband's protection from other men's attentions and in order to safeguard their honour. There is however another aspect to Sharmin choice that has to be underlined. As her parents repeatedly told her, her work and her salary were not enough to secure a long-term decent livelihood. As we said garment work is not perceived as a permanent, long-term form of employment.

The protective function of an husband is much less needed by older women, like Jaya, who after having been married twice, now proudly says, using another significant expression: '*I don't need any umbrella over my head*'. She struggles daily to make ends meet and to feed herself and three children, but she feels realistically that being married would not make any differences. In some way her age (about 32) and her previous experiences socially legitimate her choice of being formally as well as substantially the family head.

## 8 Sources of vulnerability and protection

From the analysis of the social context of the slum where most of the migrant Bengali girls live and from the daily experiences of both the migrants and the non-migrants, it emerges quite clearly that because of their age and gender they share the same constraints in terms of mobility and possibility of cross-gender interaction. They share the same risks in terms of physical and sexual violence and ultimately the same social sanctions when and if they do not conform to the social norms that regulate the transition to adulthood, sexuality and marriage. These norms deny and repress cross gender premarital attraction and intimacy and limit the possibilities of experiencing friendly relationships and developing reciprocal knowledge between boys and girls before marriage. Kamila marriage (see p. 45) is an example of how strong social control is in the slums even for those who had been born in the area.

There is a significant added source of vulnerability for the migrant working girls related to their lacking the emotional support and social protection of their parents. While this concerns all the migrants (except those whose whole family move at destination following them), for some among them who live with an elder sister's family or some distant relatives, a situation entailing both control and protection is reproduced at destination. The situation of the migrants who live alone is more problematic. Jamila's story is a powerful example of the further risks that migrant girls can incur if they lack '*an umbrella over their heads*' as one of Jamila's neighbour said, referring to her. The symbolic umbrella missing over Jamila's head is the presence of a close, possibly male, adult who would function as a 'guardian' by disciplining and protecting her. This is a condition common to most of the young migrants we interviewed that distinguishes them from other adolescents who had been born in the slum or had migrated and live with family members. As the girls' stories show, living with close relatives is a source of support as well as control and limitations. By leaving her uncle's house after a few months in Dhaka, Jamila put herself in the condition of being more independent but even much more at risk of incurring in different kind of dangers.

Even more vulnerable among the group of migrants are those who do not have any male relatives (father, brother, uncle) or reliable neighbour in the village of origin who can take care of their female relatives (mother, sisters…etc). Having male siblings or relatives is commonly considered a source of security even if paradoxically many of the migrants who have older brothers residing in the village could not count on them. These relatives also sometimes travel to Dhaka to intervene in the lives of the migrant girls like Jamila's brother did. The younger migrants felt helpless and insecure because of the absence of their parents and the lack of emotional support. They found themselves shifting overnight from a position of dependency from their parents to one of '*shadinota*' (freedom) that brought some of them to regret their situation in the village where they felt controlled but also cared for. Among our interviewees we found some older migrants who for different reasons were in a more secure and stable situation. This was the case of those had been living in Dhaka for longer and were earning an higher salary, like Lamia who felt self-confident enough to decide for further migration. This was also the case of some young women who married successfully at destination and had also been able to move from the *bustee* to a better accommodation like Shamima and most of the Garo. However this is not enough to say that greater vulnerability concerns mainly those who had just arrived or had been in Dhaka for only a few years. As I'll discuss below, these migrants' situation is characterized by a high degree of volatility.

In terms of work and earnings we understood that most migrants were far from perceiving their present condition as one that would significantly improve in the future and lead to some sort of substantial economic security. Lamia herself, who is now working in Oman and showed a strong determination in pursuing migration abroad, stated: *If I stay here my situation will not improve, I earn just enough to survive and send some money at home. I have bore with hardship all my life, I want to do something for myself and get better. If I stay here the situation will not change'*. Not all the migrants however are in the condition of doing what Lamia did, migrating abroad is expensive and for some young migrants returning to the village and get married might still be the best option.

Another important source of vulnerability is that migrant girls, as new comers to the slums, live on rent. Thus, unlike the households who are '*istanio*' (local, belong to the area since the beginning) they occupy a lower layer in the power hierarchy of the slum. They can easily become homeless, for example if they do not conform to the unwritten rules that govern the slum. This explains why all the girls interviewed said that one of the most important improvement in their situation would be to have their 'own place' to live.

As newcomers to the slums migrants are not aware of the different services that are available (usually provided by NGOs) and sometimes cannot access them because the NGOs opening times do not take into account their working schedule. To our knowledge there are no NGO or charitable organizations that specifically target migrant adolescents in the two slum areas where the research was carried out. In Mirpur, AWAJ Foundation, an organization founded by a garment worker, is active and works with women garment workers. None of our respondents in Bauniabandh and Bhola *bustee*, however, knew of its existence.

Overall the situation of the migrant adolescents working in the garment industry in Dhaka is characterized by insecurity and precariousness. The factory may suddenly close down, health emergencies may force the girl to leave (and lose) the job and return home, like all those who live in *bustee*, they are at risk of eviction. As we observed by following some of the migrants over more than one year, their situations, as well as that of their families are also quite volatile. The fate and well-being of a girl migrant and those of her family can change overnight. They are affected and by many different factors and events: the sudden death of parents or siblings at home for example, the illness of children, getting married or divorced, the intrusive surveillance of neighbours, all can completely modify the migrant's perspective and objectives.

What has been said so far in this section concerns mostly the Bengali migrants, the main source of vulnerability for the Garo is their belonging to an ethnic minority and the perception of being discriminated as such that translates into the impossibility for example to own and run their own beauty parlour. Only a few of them have managed to do so.

The Garo are more secure in terms of working and living conditions and can usually count on a wider network of relatives and family members who reside in Dhaka. The Catholic and Protestant Church and some missionary congregations active in the capital and in the area of origin of the Garo migrants constitute an important source of social security for them, besides providing employment opportunities. Many Garo women work as maids in expatriates' households.

# 9 Key implications for policy and interventions

This research has found that rural poverty, a lack of employment opportunities for girls in rural areas, and events related to climate change are among the factors that motivate adolescent girls' migration. Many individual stories also show the impact on adolescent girls of the lack of a system of social protection and insurance to provide against sudden events such as the death of the main earning member of the household. These factors can only be addressed with comprehensive policies for rural development and rural security whose discussion is beyond the scope of this report and that belong to the domain of what can be done to prevent migration from rural to urban areas. Specific interventions targeting rural adolescent girls would entail equipping them with education and life skills and create for them opportunities of paid employment and income generating activities in rural areas. Challenging the dominant social norms that circumscribe their possible life choices would also be important. This means that migration also could be acknowledged as an option and that future migrants could be prepared for urban employment and life.

The research also points up the importance of acknowledging that adolescent girls' migration is not just the result of poverty, but rather an expression of agency and a complex choice, which may be motivated by a desire to improve one' s life and escape oppressive gender regimes. Thus, we need to focus on what could be done to ensure a safer and positive migratory experience for adolescents. Another essential factor to be considered is the age of the migrants and their position in the life course and the fact that the spatial move from village to the city is linked with other multiple transitions. Our findings also suggest that we need to work towards ensuring a safer transition to adulthood.

We can say that none of the participants to our research has incurred the risk of being trafficked to Dhaka or sold into work. All of them have migrated through 'safe' social networks of relatives or acquaintances. In only one case (see Mina, p. 36) we suspected an abusive situation of a girl living *de facto* with her brother in law.

This report has shown that at destination migrant adolescents are more vulnerable than their non-migrant counterparts in many respects: they are new to the city and the slums and they are sometimes fleeing difficult circumstances in their home communities. Being an adolescent migrant in Dhaka means, in most cases, lacking the support of familial networks and a shift from being a 'daughter' to becoming the adult who supports and is responsible for the well-being of one's parents and siblings. While some girls can count on the help of siblings who migrated before or after them and some others manage to make new friends at the work place or in the slum, most of the migrants feel quite socially isolated. This also means that they have very little access to any forms of services and formally provided support. Because of their age, their working status, and their rapidly changing circumstances, they do not normally fall within the categories of beneficiaries targeted by state and non-state actors' development interventions.

As we have discussed in Section 2 specific interventions targeting adolescent girls have been undertaken, with the involvement of NGOs international agencies as well as Government bodies with the main focus on preventing child marriage. Most of these interventions concern rural areas and aim at postponing marriage by offering opportunities of training and skills development to girls. Despite the discursive importance given to women's involvement in paid work in the garments sector, the fact that a percentage of them is constituted by adolescents with specific needs is overlooked by policy makers and development interventions.

A first step towards addressing some of the adolescent migrants needs would be thus to acknowledge their existence and make them visible. Existing interventions targeting adolescent girls should be strengthened and made more inclusive; one easy measure in this respect would be to extend service providers and NGOs offices' opening times to Fridays and evenings so that migrant working girls can access them. Secondly it needs to be acknowledged that among the migrants themselves there are very different family situations and personal circumstances and different kind of strengths and vulnerabilities.

In most cases girls are not aware of what kind of facilities and services are available in the area where they live or in the city. Despite in Dhaka there are many clinics and hospitals the girls could turn to for medical assistance, in case of health problems most of the migrants return home. We have also seen how some of the migrants would consider the possibility of continuing their studies, but none of them except one were aware of the opportunities offered in this respect by the 'Bangladesh Open University.

What is needed is both the provision of information about, as well as the actual provision of the following type of services: evening/adult schooling and education, basic skills training, health related facilities, day care centres for the children for the workers. The migrants have to be informed of the presence in their areas of residence of different kind of service providers such as NGOs, Unions, micro-credit groups.

Living far-away from close family members and childhood friends also means that most migrants feel quite emotionally and socially isolated. They undoubtedly need a wider social network of peers and adults to meet their social and emotional needs.

There is a particular need to recognise that these young migrants are dealing with a significant life period when many different transitions to adulthood are being made. They have already taken the steps to enter the world of work, but making the other transitions to positive relations that lead to marriage and to child bearing are fraught with difficulty.

For these vulnerable adolescent girls in particular there is a real need to create physical and social spaces for adolescents and young people to meet, to share their experiences and practice different recreational activities. Some of them also need professional psychosocial support and counselling to mitigate their sense of loneliness and isolation, especially in cases of girls who have been the victims of violence, or those at risks of such violence and other forms of abuse.

Finally but most importantly, our research shows that in the social context of urban slums there is no space for the development of a safe adolescent/youth culture other than in the virtual realm of the Internet and mobile phones. In order to enable the creation of such space, and ensure a safe transition to adulthood for migrant as well as non-migrant girls, a sort of 'cultural' shift is needed in the way adolescents and young people are commonly regarded.

The first step in this direction would be to acknowledge and accompany rather than sanction and repress the changes that have already occurred. Young people have many more opportunities of encounter with strangers of their own age than in the past. Their circumstances force them to experiment with new forms of social life. Working and living in the city far away from guardians also gives migrant girls a sense of freedom and independence and opens a period in which they feel potentially more in charge of their lives. Cross-gender friendships and '*prem*' (love) relationships do develop in the temporal

space created by the postponement of marriage but they cannot be openly explored. Getting married remains the only socially acceptable way of being in a relationship and short-lived 'love' marriages (more or less forced) are an emerging reality.

Issues related to gender relations and gender violence, marriage, sexuality that are commonly considered beyond scrutiny and relegated to an untouchable realm of '*culture*' have to be brought to public discussion. An example of this is how sexuality is hardly mentioned in discussions about adolescents and in project targeting adolescent girls: the focus is always on 'reproductive health' rather than 'sexual health'. Programs and projects addressing the issue of child marriage aim at postponing it after 18 but there is hardly any discussion of how to deal with adolescents' sexual and emotional needs and attractions unless in a repressive way.

Awareness raising activities, action research and other initiatives are needed to work with mixed gender groups, boys and men, community leaders, parents and social workers on these themes. This would make the hidden and parallel world, so far considered 'illegal', of interactions among young people a legitimate and possible reality to deal with. This is essential to respond to and punish violent behaviour, to support the victims of violence and to develop a culture of mutual respect among young people.

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