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**Footprints of agency and space for self-assertion:
adolescent girls' migration in Bangladesh**

Abstract

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh among Bengali and Garo young women, who had migrated independently from rural areas to work in the garment industry and in beauty parlours as beauticians, respectively. The paper discusses how the decision to migrate arises and the part girls had in the decision-making process *vis a vis* other members of their household of origin. It looks at what kind of agency they express in a context of '*obhab*', (literally 'lack') and a scarcity of livelihood options and of strong social embeddedness characterized by age and gender hierarchies where there is apparently little scope for the expression of individual initiative and desires.

Adolescent girls move from rural areas in search of work in the city in a crucial moment of their life course, when the decision to migrate intersects with other important life choices about education and marriage. The growth of girls' education in both rural and urban Bangladesh, since the nineties, 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 de facto another of such trajectories.

The immediate reasons girls give for their migration resonate with the public discourse that 'justifies' their migration with poverty and the lack of economic and social resources and/or with the objective to collect money to pay the dowry for their own marriage. Their life-stories show a much more complex situation and a bigger role for girls, first in their capacity to evaluate and consider their different possibilities and negotiate them with their household members before they migrate and then to build on their own

experiences as migrants and workers to make sense of their position in the *samaj* (society, moral community) and to redefine their objectives and future choices.

I conducted the field-work on which this paper is based in 2014 in two slums in Mirpur, a neighbourhood which is part of Dhaka Metropolitan area and in three beauty parlours of the city. 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. Some data was also collected in the communities of origin of eight of the interviewed migrants.

The research team included also five young girls who had grown up in the slum area of Pallabi and some members of the staff of two local NGOs that together with an international partner NGO have been active in the area for more than 10 years.

Introduction

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork in two slums, and three beauty parlours of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh among Bengali and Garo young women who had migrated independently from rural areas in search of work opportunities in the capital. The study on migrant adolescent girls in Bangladesh is part of a 2 and a half year comparative research project 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.

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).

In this paper, I present and discuss the experiences of adolescent migrants in Bangladesh and their narratives about the decision to migrate and about their life and work at destination. I look for the footprints of agency they express in different phases of the migratory process and at the extent to which migration can contribute to shaping and transforming their sense of self-hood, the kind of social person they want to be/become, and their capacity to control and shape their own life.

Most of the migrant adolescents who move to Dhaka in search of work opportunities come from a context of rural poverty that they themselves synthesize with the word *obhab* (literally lack) which indicates a condition of lack of economic and social resources where livelihood options are scarce. The social context, in both rural and urban Bangladesh, is characterized by strong social embeddedness. As research has shown (Del Franco 2012; Amin (ed), 2015), in Bangladesh 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). Marriage is a fundamental step in the life cycle of both men and women and the statistics report that among the Bengali population 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).

Norms about marriage and premarital relationship profoundly differentiate Bengali and Garo 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. Even among the Bengali, however, the growth of girls' education since the nineties, has implied that an increasing number of girls, both in rural and urban Bangladesh are not always inevitably married in coincidence with puberty. With the growth of the Ready Made Garment sector, migration from rural areas to industrial cities for work has become *de facto* another possible choice among those that influence adolescent girls' life trajectories making them less unidirectional than in the past.

Girls' migration in developing countries is often seen as a response to poverty and structural inequalities, even more so in Bangladesh with regards to girls who move independently from rural areas to work in garment industries or beauty parlours. Without denying that in most of the cases this interpretation is justified by the experience and words of the migrants, this paper shows the complexity of the decision-making process and the role played in it by non-economic factors. By looking at the motives for migrating that girls express and at their subsequent experiences we gain insights on how the experience of migration and work intersects with other transitions and changes which characterize adolescence and youth-hood: those related to education, work, marriage and

having children. Moreover, adolescent years can also be interpreted as a significant moment in the individual psycho-social development in relation to one's sense of selfhood 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. 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. Adolescents, albeit in context specific ways, are engaged in a process of development of their own social identity and adolescence is 'a socially constructed and multiple identity whose relations to other social formations are constantly in flux' (Austin & Willard, 1998:3).

Internal migration has been on the rise in Bangladesh, linked to the expansion of the manufacturing sector in more urban areas and to the gradual worsening of livelihood options in rural areas. 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 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 program¹. 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 6th and 10th year of schooling, and decisions about her future have to be 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

¹ In rural areas girls are provided a stipend to cover education costs up to grade 12.

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. 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 10th year of school or after year 12th 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.

A note on fieldwork and methodology

The field-work on which this paper is based was conducted over 2014 in Dhaka and in Bogra District. 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. The research focused 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.

In Dhaka it was relatively easy to locate the migrants, since most of those who move to the capital from rural areas to work in garment factories tend to find cheap accommodation in slum areas. We decided to focus on two slums where I had previously worked and where Terre des Hommes Italy, with their partners ARBAN and Aparajeyo Bangladesh, have been implementing development projects mainly in the field of education, for more than 10 years. The collaboration of these NGOs was essential in facilitating the access to the slums and locating the migrants.

Five adolescent girls known to these organisations contacted 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 the Aparajeyo Bangladesh office where a first focus group discussion with 12 migrant girls living in the Bhola slum, was organised. With respect to the Garo/Mandi migrants most of those interviewed were already well known to me from previous visits to Bangladesh. The research team established a strong rapport with some of the migrants that lasted over the whole year (2014), and allowed us to follow up the main events in their lives and the changes in their circumstances.

The main obstacle was the very limited 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 busy 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. Overall the migrants were very interested in the research and eager to participate. They were happy to give us their parents' addresses so that we could visit them.

Eleven among the Bengali girls we interviewed moved to Dhaka when they were below 13 years of age, 30 of them between 13 and 17 and 6 between 18 and 20. Most of the Garo migrants (11) moved to Dhaka when they were between 13 and 17 and 2 between 18 and 20. Contrary to the initial plan to interview equal numbers of recent migrants and older women who had 10 or more years of residence at destination (30 of each), we interviewed only 17 (11 Bengali, 6 Garo) migrants who had been living in Dhaka for more than 10 years. The majority of the respondents 37 (33 Bengali, 4 Garo) had migrated up to 5 years before. Family members of 8 migrants were also interviewed in their village of origin, and some non-migrant adolescent girls.

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 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)

'I had to leave' and 'I wanted to work and study': girls' motives for migrating

Jamila: 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 anyway 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 grandmother who is completely blind for the last 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.

Jamila moved to Dhaka in 2012, her father died a few months later. She went back home in 2014 after her older brother and the uncle who hosted her for some time in the capital, found out that she was at risk of being trafficked into sex work. Afterwards, she returned to Dhaka and married in 2015 but after sometime she discovered that her husband had another wife and left him. After staying at home for a few months she went back to the capital in 2016 where she started again working in a garment factory.

Jamila's detailed account of her family situation in the village, can apply with some variations to the poorest among the participants to our research. Lima, Khaleda, Mily and Anila, when asked about the reasons for migrating, said:

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.

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.

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 work 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.

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). Girls also mentioned how they felt responsible for their families and that they wanted to contribute to the family livelihood. '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. Most of our respondents come from households that can be defined either 'poor' or 'very poor' which means, 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.

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. Monira, one of them, was eager to tell her story. Like some others' her account of her life 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 my grandmother and grandfather, with some aunts. My maternal aunts 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 'kbala' (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. Those who migrated after a failed marriage share 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 comfortable. 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...*

These stories allow to make some reflections on the kind of agency that emerge from the words of the migrant girls when explaining the reasons for their move to Dhaka. First of all, Lima's '*I had to leave*' can surely be read as an expression of lack of choice. Being it a lack of livelihood options or a situation of conflict or one of social isolation and distress after a failed marriage, most of the girls surely express the decision to migrate as an alternative to a condition of economic need, of social isolation and stigma or to conflictual and abusive family relationships.

This interpretation is reinforced by many of them saying that before migrating they did not have much expectations in terms of what life would have been like in the capital, they could not imagine what the actual work and living conditions would have been. 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. On the contrary, in some cases, migration is seen as the reason why their dreams couldn't come true:

It all went upside down. I don't have any more 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.

On the other hand, considering the young age at migration, 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 one of the girls 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.*

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 love² 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).

On the one hand, we can surely say that if their households were less vulnerable, most of

² *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.

our respondents would have not migrated but on the other we have to acknowledge that many of the young women we interviewed have not simply complied with a decision taken by someone else. The way the girls talked about the decision to migrate confirms that none of them was sent to Dhaka against their will. At one end of the continuum we have only one girl, Samia, 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 she 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. Altogether, 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. 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 for example, 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.*

Significantly most of the girls were proud to say that the decision to migrate was their own, (even if in some cases their family members said the opposite) and I would say that this is an indication of them wanting to take responsibility and showing their ownership of that decision. Jamila for example, whom I quoted above, stressed how she decided to leave despite her mother's opposition: *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 some time 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? I decided to come to Dhaka to help my family, my*

mother was crying because she did not want me to leave. As another girl said during an FGD 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 our parents were going through. Nobody told us to come. We came after becoming aware of our parents' difficulties.

Overall girls' narratives, more than their brief replies to the questionnaire, show the complexity of the motives of their migration and the complexity of the decision-making process. Shamima, for example, whom I quoted above replied to the questionnaire: *My family situation was not good. I have studied up to grade 10 but I could not sit the final exam. So, I came here to earn money. I was really upset because I could not keep studying but my father could not keep the family going.*

The longer interview we had with her shows a much more nuanced situation where she also wanted to escape an unwanted marriage.

For the Garo migrants, the situation was quite different. Their household economic condition was on average better than for the Bengali. Four of them migrated with the intention of continuing their studies 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.

Living in Dhaka: Growing up and 'understanding'

In this section, I am not going to discuss the overall impact of migration on the quality of life of the migrants and their families. I would limit my analysis to more subtle changes in the way the migrants see themselves and in their agency as capacity to play an active role in shaping their everyday life and their future. I'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. I look first at how migration has changed girls' self-perception and the perception of the space they occupy in their social and familial networks.

For a start, it is significant to notice that about two thirds of the young women we interviewed underlined that migration and work had a positive impact on their sense of self-hood and self-esteem. Even the youngest migrants who had been in Dhaka for short time claimed that with migration they had become more 'clever', capable to stand on their own feet and to manage their daily lives. 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 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 anyone 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 cleverer...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.

With work, also girls' mobility increased and despite the initial difficulties, some of the migrants appreciated 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).

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. Some 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. They have also potentially more occasions and spaces for cross-gender contacts. The use of mobile phones, one of the first purchases of working girls, 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 slums where most of the girls end up. For example, 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.

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.*

Nurjahan acknowledges that the objective of helping her family through working had been achieved but on the other hand, she considers her life 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...*

If we consider the attitude and experiences of migrant girls in respect with cross gender relationships and marriage, we see an even more ambiguous picture where most of the migrants see their migratory experience as a temporary parenthesis which would not substantially change their long-term perspective. 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: *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 wanted to wait long enough to be able to save some money from their work, they also said that they expected their parents to arrange their marriage.

This is consistent with the quantitative data we collected that 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 trajectory is quite different for the Garo migrants. Many had migrated to Dhaka long time ago and have married and settled there.

It seems thus 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 and/or have married there. Plans for the future have also become more defined and realistic: for 3 young women, Lamia, 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.

Sanjida at 15-16 refused to get married 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.

Older migrants like Lamia (8 years in Dhaka and since 2015 in Oman) and Sangida (8 years old at first migration, 27 in 2015) are earning enough to support their family of origin and themselves and can legitimately decide to postpone their own marriage for as long as they chose and until they find a suitable partner.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to identify instances and phases in the migratory story of adolescent girls, in which they manifest agency and capacity to assert themselves in making life choices. In line with Punch (2016) analysis of the reality of Bolivian children, the context in Bangladesh is one where to understand adolescent girls' capacity of action we need to situate it considering the negotiated and constrained interdependencies within and between generations together with the wider context of social relations within the *samaj* which define reciprocal entitlements, obligations and responsibilities. We have seen the extent to which as very young adolescents, girls' objectives, life plans and motivations for migration were embedded in their childhood social relations. Many of them have stressed the need to help their parents, and/or their siblings, and the lack of livelihood alternatives for the family. It emerges from many of the narratives we collected that migration has become an alternative to education and marriage for young girls if their family cannot provide for them either of the former.

Especially the youngest among the migrants and those who had not been in Dhaka for long were not much articulated about the motives for migrating and seemed to have been forced to move by the circumstances. However, we can still find footprints of agency in the way both younger and older migrants talk about their migratory experiences. Their words suggest that migration for work has been in many cases the only way out of poverty or other difficult circumstances but they also show girls' strong assumption of responsibility towards their parents and siblings. Even if migrants have only in a few cases admitted to an individual desire as a motivation for moving, like for example wanting to escape an arranged marriage or continuing their studies, it is

significant that most girls have stressed how the choice and the action of migration was their own. Drawing from Ahearn (2001) who identifies ‘*a new conception of individual agency in attributing responsibility for events to individuals rather than fate*’, I suggest that even if in some cases the parents had an important role in the decision-making process, we can consider girls’ attribution of responsibility to themselves as a manifestation of agency as much as their capacity to analyse their own and their family situation and identify the pro and cons of staying and migrating. This conception of agency resonates also with the concept of self-efficacy as ‘*people’s belief about their capabilities to produce effects*’ developed in psychology in relation to adolescents’ psychosocial development (Bandura, 1997). The transition to adulthood implies the development of young people’s belief in one’s capacity to deal with life challenges and with change and to influence and actively interact with the social environment (Coleman, 2010). It is not surprising thus, that 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.

Girls’ accounts suggest that migration has changed their self-perception and potentially opened them up to an extended network of social relations and multiple life trajectories. For most of them, migration and work has meant to acquire a degree of freedom in terms of mobility and everyday choices. In order to be able to deal with the challenges, constraints and opportunities of the life in Dhaka on their own, they have developed their capacity ‘to understand’ as capacity to orient themselves in the new social networks of the slum, the factory and the city. There is however a difference between those who spend only a few years at destination and those who for different reasons stay and work for longer. The first group, the majority, appreciate and play with the opportunities that the social life in Dhaka offers but imagine their future back in the village of origin, and delegate major life choices, like marriage, to parents. Marriage retains in girls’ imaginary a fundamental place in their life trajectory and how it intersects with migration is an important theme that deserves a far longer discussion out of the scope of this paper.

Those, with a longer experience of migration, whose whole family has moved to Dhaka following them, or have married at destination, or have become the main breadwinner for the family, feel more entitled to imagine and pursue different trajectories, like for example migration abroad and are de facto able to decide to postpone indefinitely their marriage. Being able to support economically their families back home allows them to acquire a different position vis-à-vis their parents and family members and opens spaces for self-assertion well beyond everyday interactions and choices.

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