

Migrating Out of Poverty Conference 2017

Conference Paper

Choosing a Life: Remittances and Youth Aspirations in Bangladeshi Villages

Syeda Rozana Rashid¹

Remittances are special forms of economic exchange which can be transformed into or invested in order to build other forms of tangible and intangible resources. The immediate spending of remittances in smoothing household consumption, education, land and other property has long-term economic, social and generational consequences which impact youths' aspirations and their opportunities to realise their aspirations. Building on Appadurai's (2004) theorisation of aspiration as a cultural capacity and Sen's (1990) capability approaches, the paper explores how remittances affect the life choices of young people in rural communities with high rates of labour migration in Bangladesh. It considers the complex ways in which remittances help rural Bangladeshi youths to project their future with regard to education, work and migration whilst continuing to experience constraints and opportunities in terms of their class, gender and generation. The contribution of the paper to the remittance-development nexus lies in its fresh insights, which suggests that youths can well be conceived as potential partners in the sustainable use of remittances.

1. Introduction

Recent studies have explored the impacts of migration and remittances on left behind children, adolescents and youths and how these shape their aspirations in terms of migration, education, employment and family relationships at different settings (Wickramasekara 2013, MacKenzie and Rapoport 2011, Mansour *et al* 2011). There is, however, a general dearth of research on the meaning and construction of youth aspirations belonging to remittance receiving communities and the ways in which the use of remittances, in culturally specific ways help to create youths' 'map of a journey into the future' (Appadurai 2004: 76). Drawing on Appadurai's (2004) theorisation of aspiration as a cultural capacity and Sen's (1990) capability approaches, the paper explores how remittances affect the life choices of young people in rural communities with high rates of labour migration in Bangladesh.

¹ *Syeda Rozana Rashid, PhD* is Associate Professor in International Relations at the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh and Senior Research Fellow, Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU), Dhaka. She can be accessed at: srr21rozana@gmail.com.

Against existing studies' presentation of remittances' impact on the structure and welfare of households, e. g. its dominant role in generating household income, consumption and savings, thus replacing agriculture as a main source of livelihood (Sikder, 2013) this paper stresses people's ability to manoeuvring resources through remittances and the activities in which they engage in this respect. It argues that, while remittances perform functional activities to remove structural constraints such as poverty, the extent to which youths are capable of realising their aspirations depends on the distribution of opportunities to exercise their agency. Using a capability approach the paper investigates the distribution of opportunities available to youths to pursue their life trajectories in terms of education, occupation or migration. This offers new insights into policies, that is dominated by productivist and welfare approaches which see remittances largely as a pillar of national economy, an instrument of development and a much needed resource for poor migrant households in Bangladesh.

This study is of particular relevance for Bangladesh, from where, since 1976, 10 million people have migrated to the Gulf and South East Asia to work in unskilled, semiskilled and skilled jobs (RMMRU 2017). In 2016, Bangladesh received US\$13.6 billion as remittances, which are one of the most consistent sources of household earning in Bangladesh (ibid). Again, young people in Bangladesh comprise a significant proportion of the village population; with around 30% of the total population currently aged 10-24 years. In agrarian and remittance-dependent rural Bangladesh, young people usually pursue their livelihood in agriculture, petty business, salaried jobs, labour migration and so on (BRAC 2006). The country also has its interlocking dimensions of class, gender and generational norms guiding men and women's lives. Women are seen as the bearer of prestige and honour of the family and community (*Somaj*) at large (see Mookherjee 2008). Women's honour in rural Bangladesh lies in their capacity to reproduce and perform the care duties ascribed by the cultural norms as well as modesty (Kotalova 1993). Conversely the idea of men as breadwinners and women as carers of the household makes overseas migration for employment a 'masculine' phenomenon in the villages (Rashid 2016: 174). So it is unsurprising that young girls and boys face different life choices. Young girls' educational aspirations are closely intertwined with the centrality of getting married (Del Franco 2010). The value and meaning of education and marriage for young women in Bangladesh is located in the social embeddedness whereby individuals are bound by a complex web of social and hierarchical

relationships (Kabeer 2000). Class is another key principle that interacts with gender and shapes the choice and decision-making about education, work and migration (Heissler 2008). Girls and boys who belong to a higher class are more likely to be constrained to exploit the full range of choices and actions available to them, as their higher social position often serve to narrow their thinking and mindset (ibid). The above implies that all members of the household do not equally capitalise on the spaces created by remittances and hence 'the map of the future' varies across genders, classes and generations.

Like elsewhere, 'Youth' is a contested term in Bangladesh (BRAC 2006). Although the United Nations sets an age bracket of 15 to 24 years for operational purposes, anthropologists and sociologists argue that, as a social category, 'youth' is historically constructed and culturally bounded (Thorsen 2009). In rural Bangladesh, youth is defined by age and occupation for boys and marital status for girls. Male youths in Bangladesh are those who are not yet married, such as college and university students, whereas unmarried girls, irrespective of their age, are usually considered 'youths' compared to their married or divorced counterparts. In analysing remittances' influence on youth aspiration, the paper will follow the above definition of 'youth'.

In the following sections the methodology and the setting of the study will be presented, followed by a section on the conceptual framework guiding the analysis. Drawing on case studies from the selected households, the following four sections will unfold the youths' capacity to aspire with regard to education, work and familial relations. The concluding section will summarise the findings which their policy implications.

2. Methodology

The paper is based on a qualitative study carried out in Bangladesh in April-July 2015, involving both primary and secondary methods of data collection. Tangail- a migration-rich district in central Bangladesh, where the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) conducted a global migration survey in 2014² and found positive co-relation between labour migration and poverty reduction- was selected for the study. The study villages are located in two (upazila) sub-districts of Tangail district, which is 104 kilometres northwest of Dhaka; namely, Kalihati and

² The study was conducted under the auspices of Migrating out of Poverty (MooP) , Research Programme Consortium (RPC)

Tangail Sadar (Proper). Primary data for this study were collected through in-depth interviews with the responsible adults and youths from 24 households at three stages.

There were eight migrant, eight non-migrant and eight returnee migrant households among the total 24 (8 migrant, 8 non-migrant and 8 returnee) households interviewed. In every household, at least an adult and a youth (in most cases, a son or daughter of that house) were interviewed. Additionally, people were also interviewed in the sub-sample of 10 households selected for follow up visits. There were 14 male headed and 10 female headed households. The average size of the migrant households was 5.4 members, while that of the returnee migrant households was 4.4 and that of the non-migrant households was 3.5 members. Primary data for the study were also collected from six Focus Group Discussions (FGDS) with youths, school teachers and locally important persons i.e., members of the *Union Parishad*, local Non-Government Organisation (NGO) workers, school teachers and social workers.

3. The Analytical Framework

3.1 The Notion of 'Capacity to Aspire'

While, in economic analysis, aspirations are commonly associated with wants, preferences, choices and calculations, to Appadurai (2004: 76), the capacity to aspire involves the ability to read 'a map of a journey into the future'. In other words, unless we are supplied with the information and experiences required to envisage a pathway to the desired future, it remains elusive like a map covered in unfamiliar symbols that cannot be deciphered. According to Appadurai (2004), aspirations are relatively evenly held—having particular desires for the future is not exclusive to more affluent and powerful groups. However, the capacity to aspire, which is shaped by social, cultural and economic experiences, and the availability of navigational information, are not equally distributed. Exploring the notion of aspiration as a cultural capacity, rather than an individual trait, thus facilitates a consideration of the effects of the unequal distribution of social, cultural and economic capital on the capacity. Such an analysis is highly relevant in the Bangladeshi context.

The capacity of youths to aspire is shaped by how they perceive their position in the wider economy, and the resources available to enable the (re)imagination of their own future (Sanders

and Munford 2008). As Appadurai (2004) points out, young people have uneven terrains of aspiration and different abilities to aspire, because inequalities exist in every society in terms of people's power, dignity and material resources. To him, wealthier people possess a more complex experience of the relationship between a wide range of ends and means - 'because they have a bigger stock of available experiences of the relationship of aspirations and outcomes... a better position to explore and harvest diverse experiences of exploration and trial ...[and] many opportunities to link material goods and immediate opportunities to more general and generic possibilities and options' (Ibid: 63) The imagining of 'a good life' is also embedded in an uneven landscape constrained by class and gender divides. Understanding youth aspirations in a given context, therefore, demands careful examination of youths' capacity 'to explore and harvest diverse experiences of exploration and trial' and the opportunities available to them 'to link material goods and immediate opportunities to more general and generic possibilities and options' (ibid: 62). Thus, the above approach allows for a grounded analysis of different dimensions of youth choices and preferences within the structures of inequality and deprivation that are endemic in a remittance-dependent community in Bangladesh.

3.2 Remittances as a Special Form of Resource

In analysing how remittances³ can be used to create opportunity for youths, this paper consider capital and/or wealth accumulation and their meanings from a socio-cultural perspective. It will borrow Ferguson's (1992) idea that exchange is culturally regulated and guided along socially, legally or morally approved paths. To him, any attempt practically to recognize wealth holding in any particular setting needs to capture the specific cultural construction and forms of property and exchange that constitutes a 'cultural topography of wealth' (Ferguson 1992: 70). The above framework will offer a 'topography' of remittances that lays open the different opportunity spaces for male and female youths to aspire in culturally approved ways, the logic behind investments opening opportunity spaces and the different interests motivating the establishment and enforcement of cultural rules governing their use. In doing so, the 'pathways' of remittance exchange will be conceived as culturally and politically constructed.

³ Remittances in this paper will include both 'personal transfer' and the 'compensation' of employees as personal remittances' (World Bank, 2015)

3.3 Intra-household Bargaining and Capability Approaches

Writing on the intra-household dynamics of gender relations, Kabeer (1998:92) criticised Neo-Classical Economics' treatment of the household as a 'black box' of joint welfare maximisation and unified preferences and pooled resources. Drawing on examples from non-unitary models, Kabeer emphasises the importance of looking at the household members' 'divergence of preferences' which is again regulated by the differentiated nature of power and its exercise. In effect, there are potentially different levels of wealth, consumption, leisure and work within the household. Sen (1990), although agreeing that the household is a realm of extensive conflict and pervasive cooperation, suggest a capability approach which evaluates the functioning available for individuals to choose rather than, or in addition to, the functioning they eventually achieve. To Sen, agency, freedom and choices are fundamental to understanding people's wellbeing. He also makes a distinction between the 'opportunity aspect' and the 'process aspect' of freedom. While the former is concerned with the opportunities available to a person to achieve things that s/he has reason to value, the latter is more about the agency and processes to pursue and realise goals that s/he values. (Sen 2009). For the current study, the remittance practices of the households can well be conceived as the 'opportunity aspect' whereas the different capacity of youths to aspire epitomizes the 'process aspect' .

Unlike Kabeer (1999), who articulates multiple facets of female agency in her conceptualisation of 'female empowerment', Sen (1990: 148) focuses on a person's perceptions about his/her own self-interest, which is often 'overshadowed by social rules and by conventional perceptions of legitimacy.' This is of particular relevance to our analysis of male and female youths' life choices in migrant villages of Bangladesh, which have their own rules governing social life.

4. The 'Topography' of Remittances in the Household

If we take poverty in its multi-dimensional terms such as the overlapping deprivation of education, health and standard of living as developed by the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) (see Alkire and Santos 2010) and material deprivation, desperation, lack of security, dignity, risk and high cost of thin comfort, as articulated by Appadurai (2004: 66), then we must conclude that all of the households interviewed in the study somehow fall into that 'poor' category. The classification of the households in the high, middle and low income group has distinct purposes in

research. A study like this, which focuses on people's voices, nonetheless relies more on their own interpretation of class. People who possess enough land to meet their yearly requirement for rice are known as rich (*valo obostha*), those who can manage to produce or buy enough to eat three times a day all year round as middling poor (*konorokom chole*), and those who cannot earn enough to have at least three proper meals a day as the poorest (*Khub Garib*) in the villages. The trend of migration was higher among the middling poor than the rich and the poorest:

Jillur (48), who was once a marginal farmer, had decided to go abroad as he increasingly had difficulties to bear the cost of the five-member family. With his small earnings, the household struggled to buy food and, on occasion, could afford only two meals per day (lunch and dinner). He went to Saudi Arabia in 2000 with the help of a local agent at a cost of Tk. 365,000 (US\$ 8320)⁴, borrowed from the extended family and neighbours. During his first two years abroad, Jillur was basically jobless and had no contact with the family. Rohima (42) underwent much hardship during this time. She had to maintain her family by borrowing money. In order to avoid pressure from their creditors, the family went into hiding for a few months. Jillur started sending remittances about two years after migrating, when he managed to find a job in a local restaurant. He had been employed there ever since. He earned Tk. 20,000 (US\$ 255)⁵ and sent it to his brother-in-law's (his wife's brother) account every month.

4.1 Survival First

The remittance behaviour of the household, therefore, primarily aims at removing the constraints such as the lack of basic amenities, risk of falling into poverty and creating opportunities through investing in land, houses, education and marriage, the meaning and process of which are highly contextual and socially embedded. Migration of one or more members on their own or other members' initiative help households to escape their precarious conditions as this offers 'intergenerational interdependence' and 'protective function' (Heissler 2011). Following case exemplify this well:

⁴ 1 US\$=43.89 Bangladeshi Taka (BDT) in 2000, Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>, access date 19 December 2015.

⁵ 1 US\$ was between Bangladeshi Taka 77.99 -78.74 in December 2013 to December, 2015 (Source: <http://usd.fxexchangerate.com/bdt/> (accessed on 19 December 2015).

Remittances provided households with a greater sense of food security by giving the members uninterrupted access to money to meet their dietary needs and food preferences and so ensure an active, healthy life. Households' situation changed dramatically due to the arrival of remittances. As a respondent stated, "Now we can afford chicken and beef curry once a month for lunch or dinner, as well as *ruti* (bread), *muri* (puffed rice), *pantabhat* (watered rice), and eggs and tea for breakfast". Meeting the poorer households' basic food requirements is only one manifestation of how remittances contribute to their survival. Migrant households also spent their remittances on buying medicine on a regular basis, covering the education of their children and improving their living standards through buying and renovating houses and homesteads, indicating a relative improvement in all three dimensions of MPI.

4.2 Investing in Tangible Wealth

Most migrant households incurred a sizable loan (usually between US\$500-4000) to finance their migration. After loan repayment and assisting the household's consumption, the next priority for the migrant households is to build some tangible property i.e. land and houses. The trajectory however differs according to the starting position of the house as well as the asset base. While larger, low income and landless households were spending more on household consumption and basic necessities such as food and medicine, smaller, middle income and landowning households have invested in land, agriculture, business or house building. The pattern of agricultural-based investment includes purchasing agricultural land, leasing land and releasing mortgaged land to cover cultivation and agriculture production costs which include the hiring of labour, purchasing farm inputs and using equipment. In a country which offers little social protection for poorer people, landed property serves as cultivation or other forms of income for migrant households. It also provides families with "an unwritten social certificate" to promote the family's reputation, power and status (Sikder, 2013: 232).

4.3 Developing Human Resources

First-generation migrants paid more attention to facilitating consumption and building tangible property. The second generation, by contrast, expressed their willingness to spend on education. Luna (20), who was trying to follow in her migrant mother's footsteps, stated: "*If I go abroad, I*

shall educate my son", whereas, for her mother, migration had been a survival strategy which allowed her household to climb the ladder of economic mobility. From Luna's statement, it appears that the household wished to achieve social mobility and also invest in the third generation's education while the second generation (Luna and her cousins) remained largely uneducated, something which is also evident in other South Asian contexts (Osella and Osella, 2000). However, the social organisation of the family in Bangladesh shapes the extent to which migrants like Luna can fulfil their aspirations. Ultimately, it is the head of the household who retains the power and responsibility to accommodate all preferences and, although spending preferences are discussed within the household, the final decision depends on the household head's analysis of what is best for the household.

It is within this context that, building upon the cases collected from the Tangail villages, the following sections will discuss youth aspirations regarding education, occupation and familial relations.

5. The 'Capacity to Aspire'

5.1 I Want to Complete my Schooling First

"I shall think about taking 'a line' (a job) after I complete my HSC (Higher Secondary Certificate). My maternal uncle said that there is no need to go abroad, I can stay here and do a good job."- said Rumi (17), when asked about his future education plans. His sister Rubina (18) said: "I don't need to think about my future. I will do what my parents consider best for me". Rumi and Rubina 's father Jillur is a migrant to Saudi Arabia (See his story in page 8). During our field work both of them were studying in the eleventh grade at the local secondary school.

Youth aspirations regarding education in the villages are closely linked to the cultural construction of 'an educated person' and the facilities available to them. Like Rumi, a large number of youths in the locality were willing to pursue an education at least up to higher secondary (class XII) level to make themselves eligible for non-menial work. In the local context, an HSC degree also carries the symbolic value of being 'educated' which is considered a gateway for escaping the age-old image of poor farmers and improving its members' life chances (Simelane 1995: 218, Ansell 2000: 147-148). The case study implies that the desire for education increases when one or more

household members migrate. Youths from migrant households with a constant source of remittances enjoyed more opportunities to choose their aspired life which, of course, varied across the socio-economic conditions and genders.

In general, migrant and non-migrant households spent 10-25% of their earnings on educating their children. The expenses involved study materials, such as books and stationery, uniforms, snacks, school fees, transport and private tuition. However, the amount spent varies from student to student depending on their grades. The cost of private tuition varied from BDT 200-500 (US\$3-6) per month depending on where and how the students were taught - at home, at the teacher's house or at school in a group.

Youths who had achieved good results in the public examinations expressed their willingness to study either medicine or engineering at university level which were of high economic and social value. Yet, for many youths from low-income families in the villages, acquiring life choices through higher education is time-consuming, expensive and often beyond their means. Also, the universities are mostly located in the capital or larger cities. While public universities are highly competitive, the private universities with lower entry requirements are expensive. Not only were the HE institutions often located at a geographical distance, but the knowledge and information required to gain entry might also be relatively inaccessible to these students and their families (Bok 2010: 164). Youths were thus mostly found to study at local colleges that provide Bachelor of Arts (BA) degrees. Some youths dropped out of school to take paid work which was crucial for supporting their family. While remittances in the study households were used to finance short-and long-term skill-development courses, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) not only ascribed a lower social value than university degrees but also people believed that such training could not provide them with jobs.

The capacity to aspire for education are highly circumscribed by gender norms of marriage, education and household responsibility for boys and girls. Female youths pursued education as much as their brothers and almost all the women expressed a willingness to become a doctor, police officer, NGO worker or teacher. However, they also knew the reality of rural Bangladeshi women being expected to get married in their teens. We have been told that too much education

might also make it difficult to find a suitable husband for a girl. Most of the female youths were sceptical and confused about the possibility of building an independent career. According to the teachers, although girls had a good record of educational attainment and accomplishment, their dropout rate was much higher in class IX and above due to marriage. We shall return to this discussion in Section 5.5.

5.2. *All I Want is a Government Chakri*

"My future plan is not so big. I just want a *Chakri* (salaried job)": said Zia, son of Ali (47), who had been a migrant worker in Saudi Arabia for the past 15 years. As his father was away, his maternal uncles took responsibility for him so that he could avoid falling in with 'bad companions.' He obtained his bachelor's degree from a local college and then worked in a renowned brand shop in Dhaka for a year, before leaving his job in the hope of finding a better one. Motivated by his maternal uncles and peers, he also tried to migrate to Singapore and contacted middlemen, but all of his efforts proved in vain. Meanwhile, he spent Tk. 45,000 on a laptop, and attended basic computer training (MS word, Excel, etc.) in Shakhipur, a nearby town. He thought that this training would help him in his job.

Like Zia, in general, youths belonging to migrant and non-migrant households expressed their willingness to take a *Chakri*⁶ or become an 'Officer.' - which in local parlance meant doing service in a public or private organization on a monthly salary. The public discourse made them believe that there were job-security (permanent), regular payment after retirement from the fund generated during services ('pension'), residential facilities (house) and 'opportunities to earn extra' in government jobs, although the salary was unattractive (*beton kom*). Such an aspiration is rooted in the greater socio-economic condition where people strive to earn a livelihood that may offer social security against the risk of poverty (Rashid 2016, Sikder 2013). Secondly, the cultural value of a government job is very high compared to other professions due to the power, status and job security of such a service holder (BRAC 2006). More importantly, as a region, Tangail has a historical precedence of producing highly educated persons with high profile jobs in the civil service, judiciary, police and defence. The long tradition of people joining the services has enabled families from all socio-economic backgrounds to find their children an 'official' *Chakri*, which is not excessively high up but that offers safety, security and honour. While the poor socio-economic

⁶*Chakri* (salaried job) is a term used to describe waged work, based on a contract that provides a fixed income. It is also associated with having a job that requires the ability to read and write, which denotes status (see Heissler 2008: 5).

condition and cultural practices in Tangail have broadened youth's opportunity to seek livelihoods beyond agriculture, the choices were also circumscribed by their inaccessibility to cash, higher education and dependence on rich and elite people of the village.

A *Chakri* is a phenomenon which is intended to be reserved for men for a number of reasons. Service means engaging with the public domain which, in the context of Bangladesh, tends to be dominated by men. By engaging in *Chakri*, a woman is considered to neglect her household responsibilities and children. More importantly, females' engagement in a salaried job often emasculates their men- the principal provider for the family. Given the above, only women with no male provider can join the services. In fact, households were used to fund the education of both sons and daughters with two different aims - sons were expected to become a service holder, professional, migrant or businessman, while daughters were educated to be eligible for a better marriage and become an 'educated' mother.

It is also evident that remittances contribute to occupational aspirations in a number of ways. First, households with a remittance supply were more able to educate their children in preparation for an occupation. Secondly, the ability to afford 'speed money' (bribes) for *Chakri* is higher for migrant households. Thirdly, the onus of earning and contributing to the family is very high for male youths in non-migrant families especially if the household lacks able earning members (Heissler 2011), whereas it is less so for remittance-receiving households. The migration of a father or brother allows non-migrant youths to choose their preferred occupation. Crucially, it may appear that remittances create unequal opportunities, yet the opportunity spaces for occupational choice that remittances offer to all should not be overlooked.

Youths had also developed a natural apathy towards agricultural work due to practical reasons. Tangail is a low-lying area which is submerged by water for almost half the year. Although livestock and agriculture were common means of livelihood, neither the youths nor their parents saw any future in farming. Historically, people in this region have also seen the growth of the weaving industry rather than the formation of small agro-based farms which are seen elsewhere in Bangladesh. While almost all of the youths- both males and females - reserved time for the farming activities of the household, none of them aspired to become 'farmers' in the future. In

reality, the networks and culture of migration that developed in the region expanded the youths' opportunity not to aspire to become farmers which is of a lower social and economic value.

The study observed a general lack of desire among youths to start a business due to a lack of capital, insurance and back-up plans. *Although loans are readily available for migration, it is not so for business*, stated Kuddus (40), a returnee from Saudi Arabia. Interestingly enough, almost all the returnees tried to invest in a business upon their return home, implying that business was never very aspired but rather considered as a stop-gap strategy. We came across migrants who were rolling their foreign-earned money as capital into productive cycles of poultry, fishing or paddy businesses while waiting to migrate again. In most cases, the migrants felt that it was too risky to invest due to a lack of insurance against loss. In many cases, the capital was consumed by meeting other needs, such as medical treatment or sudden shocks.

5.3. Bidesh (Foreign Land) Is My Last Resort

"I shall try to do something in the country first. If that fails, then I shall ask my brother to arrange for me to migrate," said, Sohag (19), a local college student. Sobuj (24), Sojib (22), Sohag (19) and Salim (16) were four brothers who belonged to a middle earning household in Nagpur village, Tangail. Their father, Hazi, was a farmer and also had a livestock business. In 2011, Hazi sent his second son, Sojib, to Saudi Arabia to diversify the earnings of the six-member household at a cost of Tk. 400,000 (US\$5120). He had to sell the only piece of land the family owned and borrowed from others to manage the migration costs. Although Hazi earns Tk. 400 (US\$ 5) from his livestock business, after Sojib's migration, remittances appeared to be the principal source of earning for the family. He used to remit Tk. 50-60,000 (US\$ 640-770) every four to six months into Hazi's bank account.

Like Sohag, youths in the study villages expressed contradictory views about their aspiration for *Bidesh* (migration to foreign land). During the FGDs, some youths expressed their willingness to go abroad after finishing college, whereas most youths planned to go abroad only after all other avenues to become established in life had been exhausted. It was clear that the overall standard of living in the country, lack of wealth and education generated more aspirations whereas youths were well aware of the hardships associated with such migration. Yet, the youths also stated that migration was not an end in itself, but a means to earn capital with which to fulfil the ultimate goal of living a 'better life.'

Also foreign lands are hierarchically located in youths' imagination. While some countries, such as Singapore and Dubai, were associated with economic opportunity and accomplishment, countries like Saudi Arabia or Malaysia conveyed an image of hardship, hard working conditions, and so on. The youths also mentioned that they often felt discouraged by the high migration costs, misappropriation of money by intermediaries and high risk involved. These ideas were mostly shaped by the stories of successful or failed migration, as well as the profiles of the returnees. Sometimes, the hardship and experience of their parents dissuaded them from pursuing it as a short- or long-term livelihood strategy. The aspiration for student migration was much higher among youths than migration for unskilled labour, as the former carried a higher social value and better earning opportunities. During the FGDs, some of the respondents stated that they had completed an 'English Course' and contacted some 'Agencies' to find out about their prospects of pursuing a higher education abroad.

While the possibility of economic mobility through migration was readily admitted by the youths, they were sceptical about the social status of the migrant families due to their involvement in menial work abroad and low level of education. In the village context, a high income is a necessary condition for economic solvency and high buying power. However, a high income without education and a good job has social value. A middle income family with educated and service holder members have a higher social status than a high income household with uneducated and menial workers abroad. This is why male youths aspired more for student migration which offered opportunities for both social and economic mobility. The relative social importance of 'official jobs' was captured like this: "*Migrants may have money but an office job holder accrues a lot of social respect.*" This statement implies the importance of 'prestige' (*shomman*) as a crucial element of class that youths care about in the formation and fulfilment of their aspirations.

Education and labour migration are not always positively linked. Education up to Secondary School Certificate (SSC) level may be useful for getting a job abroad, but higher education may limit the possibilities of labour migration at the individual level. Bangladesh has yet to capture the labour market for skilled workers. As a result, people with a Bachelor of Social Science (BSS) or Master of Social Science (MSS) degree often find themselves overqualified and underemployed regarding unskilled and semiskilled work: "My parents and neighbours think that I shouldn't spend time on

agriculture or husbandry. They think that a Master's degree holder should only do office work. So, in that sense, I feel pressure on me..I don't want to go abroad to sell by labour." said Sobuj, who felt great pressure from the family to secure a white collar job to enhance the prestige of the family, whereas the household consumption was already secured by his younger brother's labour migration. There were households where migrants supported the education of one or more sibling to enhance the social status of the household, increasing the choices of its members.

5.4. Why Shall I Go Abroad- It's Men's Domain

Unlike their male counterparts, female youths in this study rarely aspired to labour migration. As this study found, women in Bangladesh took decisions to migrate only in special circumstances of high risk of poverty and lack of male members to provide the household. In the ethos of village life, female migration is reserved for desperate and lone women e.g. divorced, deserted or widowed females. Over the years, the increased incidence of torture and vulnerability to sexual exploitation has also raised public objection to female migration. Most female migrants, who negotiated their migration in the first place, conceded to the socially approved gender norm of submitting their earnings to the male head of their family in order to strike a balance between their personal and household interests. While women's migration increases their autonomy and confidence, the type of work they do carries a low social status and, therefore, families try to restrict their migration to retain the household's status (Rashid 2012). As Fatema (30), wife of returnee Kuddus, commented: *"Those who married but their husband didn't keep them, or those with a bad reputation can go abroad."*

This is why, despite their migrant mother's huge contribution to the household's economic mobility, most female youths did not wish to migrate abroad, although this remained a viable life choice for male and female youths alike. While the mother's migration opened up the potential for their daughters' migration through their social networks, most daughters had rejected going abroad:

"My Mum asked me to go abroad, but I didn't want to. I'm afraid I won't be able to live alone. Also I have a son whom I need to care for. Who is going to take care of him in my absence?" (Luna (23))

"I admire my Mum. She has done a lot for the family but I don't want to follow her path. You know, people don't speak positively about women migrants." (Aleya(27))

"I wish I could go abroad like my Mum. I asked my husband (a migrant). He said, "Take the divorce letter from me, before you migrate." (Shorifa(27))

5.5 The Capacity to Hope for 'a Good Marriage'

Female youths' opportunity spaces to fulfil their dreams about developing an independent career through education are shrunk by the social norms about their age and marriageability. While the parents of a girl faced tremendous social pressure after she reaches puberty, remittances helped to cover the cost of her marriage. Most migrant parents wanted to marry off their daughter within the migration period to take the advantage of the cash flow. Like elsewhere in Bangladesh (see Heissler 2008, Del Franco 2010) girls in the study villages were expected to be married off between 15-19. Some girls expressed their unwillingness to marry as they wanted to study further. However, they also said that they had to agree at the end because parents felt pressure as girls grow older (when she reaches the age of 20), as boys may not choose them or may demand a higher dowry because of this.

In other cases, the girls agreed with their parents simply due to the social norms and practices of abiding by one's elders' decisions. Girls often had little choice over parental preferences of early marriage to keep down the cost of dowry. In the context of rural Bangladesh, a good marriage is considered a sound investment for the future of daughters (Rao 2015). It is not surprising, therefore, that young girls will opt for a 'good marriage' when one or more household members are working abroad and so able to finance the marriage.

Remittances interface with female youths' marriage aspirations at several levels: firstly, parents' consistent earnings abroad created hope for better marriages due to the availability of social and economic capital generated by remittances. There were some costs involved with the marriage of daughters, including a dowry, gold ornaments, utensils, gifts for the groom and a small feast. The cost of a marriage varied from Tk. 10,000 to 100,000 (US\$130-1300), depending on the socio-economic condition of the household. In many cases (as happened to Zia's sister), the migration of the groom was demanded as a dowry, implying that the girl's family should finance the groom's journey.

Female migration and poverty both carried lower social status for a bride. A few migrant mothers, tried to overcome those barriers by investing their remittances in their daughters' education as well as building physical assets. This provided them with better bargaining power to choose a literate groom for their daughter. Educated female youths usually opted for an educated groom with a permanent job, but their capacity was often circumscribed by the low socio-economic condition of their households. Compared to them, non-migrant poor families often faced the double problem of choosing a suitable groom and meeting her daughter's demands.

The study found that migrant families were economically better able to shoulder the responsibility for their divorced daughters and marry them off again. Remittances gave the families of the girls a greater capacity to look after them after divorce and thereby allowed the girls to leave an unhappy marriage which they might have otherwise been trapped into without the remittances flowing to their parents. Unlike a non-migrant household, where divorce might be a catastrophe, placing an extra burden on the natal family, access to cash by the migrant families gave them better bargaining power to choose or attract a groom for the divorced daughter.

6. Conclusion

The paper delineated the crucial ways in which remittances contribute to the shaping of youths' aspirations in migrant households in rural Bangladesh. The central argument was that the youths' capacity to look forward to their preferred way of life increases manifold as and when their family members migrate abroad and send remittances, even if poorer households prefer to strengthen their economic base instead of investing in the development of human resources. This suggests that youths can well be conceived as potential partners in the sustainable use of remittances.

As a special form of resources - remittances are transformed into culturally-valued economic and social wealth in multiple ways. The use of remittances to buy the basic food items, land and houses or to cover the cost of the education and marriage of their children are, in effect, the means or pathways through which household members increase the possibility of attaining social standing, generational mobility and social capital, which are ends in themselves but also instrumental in

generating aspirations among youths about their future pathways. However, the extent to which youths will be benefitted by the opportunity spaces created by remittances depends on household decision making process, which is mostly governed by norms of gender and generation.

Three areas of youth aspirations were explored in this paper: education, occupation, and migration, which have important policy implications. In the context where education is seen as a ladder to earning social mobility, the youths, irrespective of their age, expressed a desire to obtain a basic education - which means completing higher secondary school. Higher education, in contrast, was less aspired to, not only because it is often unavailable or expensive and beyond their means but also because the youths are under pressure 'to be established' before the remittances cease to flow.

The study identified that the youths' capacity to aspire for education is influenced by a number of factors i.e. the cultural construction of 'education', the social and economic values attached to different levels of education, and the facilities and information available to them. Both structural constraints and lack of information in the locality limited the youth's capacity to aspire for education which was broadly conceived as a precondition for overcoming generational poverty.

The youths in this study recognised, at least to some degree, their capacity to choose from a variety of potential career pathways. Most of them expressed a deep inclination towards government jobs due to their high social value, and less so for agriculture or business. To many, labour migration abroad serves only as a stop gap strategy or the last choice in life. In all cases, youths in the migrant households had a better capacity to realise their occupational desires as they had access to cash through remittances.

It was, however, evident that higher education and labour migration are negatively connected. Whereas the country has reached the stage of growth where export-led labour intensive manufacturing and overseas employment have created demand for secondary and technical education commensurate to the growth (Sen and Ahmed 2015), youths were found less willing to pursue TVET due to its low social value and employability. The evidences are important for policies addressing long-term education and the appropriate skilling of the Bangladeshi labour force to be absorbed in the local and international labour markets.

The paper brought out complexities in youth aspirations using the lenses of gender. While male and female youths possess similar ambitions regarding their future education, the choice of female youths to pursue a job or career are, in most cases, circumscribed by gender norms in rural Bangladesh which sees women as the carer and men as the provider of the household. More importantly, female youths' capacity to aspire to migration was constrained by the gender discourses about age, marriageability, honour, vulnerability and insecurity. In this context, female youths mostly see their future in a 'good marriage,' the prospect of which again rises when families have access to remittances. Remittances interface with marriage in establishing the right kind of female identity shrank young women's opportunity spaces for pursuing other aspirations such as education and career. These evidences suggest to rethink about policies which aims at mainstreaming gender in education and development in broader sense.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to the Department for International Development (DFID) for supporting the study under the Research Programme Consortium (RPC) project of Migrating out of Poverty. I also wish to acknowledge our gratitude to Dr. Dorte Thorsen for her lucid reading of drafts and intellectual support throughout the research. I am also thankful to my co-researcher Dr. Jalal Uddin Sikder, research assistant Badrul Islam and RMMRU for extending all out support to carry out the research on which the paper is written.

References

- Alanen, L., 2003. 'Childhoods: the generational ordering of social relations'. In Mayall, B. and Zeiher, H. (eds.) *Childhood in Generational Perspective*. London: Institute of Education, University of London.
- Alkire, S. and Santos, M.E. 2010. 'Acute *Multidimensional Poverty*: A New *Index* for Developing Countries.' *OPHI Working Papers* 38, University of Oxford, Poverty and Human Development Initiative, UK. <http://www.ophi.org.uk/multidimensional-poverty-index/>, Accessed on 24.02.2016.
- Agarwal, B. 1997. 'Bargaining and Gender Relations: Within and Beyond the Household', *Feminist Economics*, 3 (1) 1997, 1-51.

- Ansell, N. 2000. 'Sustainability: Life Chances and Education in Southern Africa' In: M. Redclift (ed.), *Sustainability: Life Chances and Livelihoods*, p. 144-157. London: Routledge.
- Appadurai, A., 2004. 'The capacity to aspire: culture and the terms of recognition', In V Rao and M Walton (eds.) *Culture and Public Action*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, pp. 59-84.
- Aziz, K. M. and Maloney, C. 1985. *Life Stages, Gender and Fertility in Bangladesh*. Dhaka, International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh.
- Bok, J., 2010. 'The capacity to aspire to higher education: 'It's like making them do a play without a script''. *Critical Studies in Education*, 51(2), pp.163-178.
- BRAC, 2006a. *Adolescents and Youths in Bangladesh: Some Selected Issues* Research Monograph Series No. 31
- Del Franco., N. 2010. 'Aspirations and self-hood: exploring the meaning of higher secondary education for girl college students in rural Bangladesh. *Compare*, 40(2), 147-165.
- Durham, D., 2004. 'Disappearing youth: Youth as a social shifter in Botswana'. *American Ethnologist* 31.4: 589–605.
- Ferguson, J., 1992. 'The Cultural Topography of Wealth: Commodity Paths and the Structure of Property in Rural Lesotho'. *American Anthropologist* 94 (1): 55-73.
- Heissler, K., 2008. 'Children's migration for work in Bangladesh: The extra-and intra-household factors that shape 'choice'and 'decision-making''. *Childhoods Today*, 2(1).
- _____, 2011. We Are Poor People So What is the Use of Education and Quest; Tensions and Contradictions in Girls' and Boys' Transitions from School to Work in Rural Bangladesh. *European Journal of Development Research*, 23(5), pp.729-744.
- Kabeer, N., 2000. *The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka*. London: Verso.
- _____. 1999. 'Resource, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women Empowerment.' *Development and Change*, 30: 435-464.
- _____. 1998. "Struggles over Meaning and Method in the Study of Household Economics." *Feminist visions of development: Gender analysis and policy*: 93.
- Kotalova, J., 1993. *Belonging to Others: Cultural Construction of Womenhood among Muslims in a Village in Bangladesh*, Uppsala Studies in Cultural Anthropology.

- Lucas, R. E. B. and O. Stark., 1985. 'Motivations to Remit: Evidence from Botswana' *The Journal of Political Economy* 93(5): 901–918.
- MacKenzie, D., and H. Rapoport, 2006. 'Can Migration reduce Educational Attainment; Evidence from Mexico?' World Bank Policy Research Working Paper-3952. Development Research Group, The World Bank. Washington, D.C.
- Mansour, W., Chaaban, J., and Litchfield, J., (2011). 'The impact of migrant remittances on school attendance and education attainment: Evidence from Jordan'. *International Migration Review*, 45(4), 812-851.
- Mookherjee, N., 2008. 'Gendered Embodiments: Mapping the Body-Politic of the Raped Woman and the Nation in Bangladesh'. *Feminist Review*. 88:1(36-53).
- Osella, F., and C. Osella, 2000. *Social Mobility in Kerala*. London: Pluto.
- Rashid, S. R., 2016. *Uncertain Tomorrows: Livelihoods, Capital and Risk in Labour Migration from Bangladesh*, Dhaka: UPL
- _____, 2012 'Gendering Space and Movement: A Reflection on Overseas Labour Migration Policy in Bangladesh' In Rahman Md Mizanur and Ullah AKM Ahsan (Eds). *Asian Migration Policy: South, Southeast and East Asia*. New York: Nova Science Publishers.
- Rao, N., 2015. 'Transnational Remittances and Gendered Status Enhancement in Rural Bangladesh' in Hoang LA and B Yeoh (eds.) *Transnational Labour Migration, Remittances and the Changing Family in Asia*, Palgrave/Macmillan, NY.
- RMMRU, 2017. *Labour Migration from Bangladesh 2016: Achievements and Challenges*, RMMRU and MJF, Dhaka.
- Sen, A.K., 1990. 'Development as Capability Expansion', in Keith Griffin and John Knight (eds), *Human Development and the International Development Strategy for the 1990s*, London: Macmillan, pp. 41-58.
- , 2009. *The Idea of Justice*, Penguin Books, England
- Sen, B and M. Rahman, 2015, 'Earning Inequality, Returns to Education and Demand for schooling: Addressing Human Capital for Accelerated Growth in the Seventh Five Year Plan of Bangladesh', Background paper for the Seventh Five Year Plan. Government of

Bangladesh.http://www.plancomm.gov.bd/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/3_Strategy-for-Education-and-Training_Final-Version.pdf

Sikder, M.J.U., 2013. 'Remittances and Life Chances: A Study of Migrant Households in Bangladesh'. Unpublished PhD Thesis.Faculty of Arts, Monash University, Melbourne.

Simelane, H. S., 1995. 'Labour Migration and Rural Transformation in Post-Colonial Swaziland'. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 13 (2): 207-226.

Thorsen, D., 2009. 'Mobile youth with little formal education: Work opportunities and practices' *Development Research Center on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty*, University of Sussex, Brighton.

Wickramasekara, P. 2013 'Decent Work, Youth Employment and Migration in Asia', International Migration Paper No. 113, International Migration Branch, International Labor Office (ILO), Geneva

World Bank, 2015, <https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/114950>
Accessed on 20 November 2015

(8130 words)