

# Continuity and Change in Patriarchal Structure: Recent Trends in Rural Bangladesh

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## Abstract

This paper is about the transformation in the patriarchal structure of Rashidpur village in Munshiganj district, Bangladesh following overseas migration of men leaving their women in the village. In doing so, the study explores the continuity and changes in the discourse and practices of traditional gender roles in a patriarchal Muslim society considering the perspective of both men and women. The study pays especial attention to transnational communication of the villagers, the changes in their gender based mobility and its contribution to the changes in patriarchal ideology. The study is based on ethnographic fieldwork, which examines whether the changes are sustainable or temporal for a period when the husbands are abroad and what happens to the practices when the husbands permanently return. Though the findings of the study indicate the diversity and complexity of practices, migration of men increases the mobility of the left behind women. Again, the entrance of cell phone, TV and satellite channels and transnational communication of women have significantly changed their agency as individuals. Consequently, many young wives like to come out of the domination of their in-laws and live in separate households instead of previous joint arrangement. The overall findings of the study show a remarkable change in the traditional pattern of village life. The study contextualizes structure and agency to understand how patriarchal structure influences individuals and how individuals play a role to transform the structure in exchange through their mobility, activities and resistance when the migrants are abroad.

**Keywords:** agency, mobility, patriarchy, structure, transformation

## Introduction

In one sunny late afternoon in March 2017, two friends were chatting sitting on grass of a corner of the bank of a pond near a tea stall in the middle of Rashidpur village. Seeing me passing through the unpaved path beside the bank, they greeted and

requested me to sit beside. Afterwards, a group of men of different age who had gathered in front of the tea stall to enjoy their regular cup of tea, biscuit and pass their leisure time chatting with one another, came forward to us and joined the conversation. Although the group conversation covered diverse issues, I had the opportunity to keep it focused on the topics related to my objectives which included migration history of the village, changes in the village social organizations or traditional power structure and changes in gender based lifestyle and mobility of the villagers after migration etc.

This paper<sup>1</sup> is based on my PhD study which is a yearlong ethnographic fieldwork from January to December, 2017 in Rashidpur, a migrant village under Rashunia *union parishad*<sup>2</sup> under Sirajdikhan *Upazila*<sup>3</sup> in Munshiganj district, Bangladesh. The village is situated about 45 kilometres to the south from the zero point of the capital city Dhaka, Bangladesh. Agriculture has been the main occupation of the villagers for many generations before migration. But they have started going abroad as labours from the beginning of the 1980s which is why a remarkable change has been occurred in their traditional occupations. At present, remittance has become the main source of survival of many households. Remittance has also brought a significant change in the lifestyle and housing construction in the village as the households have been transformed from thatched to corrugated tin or sometimes to brick built buildings. But the communication to and from the village is still very difficult as it does not have road connection with the adjacent villages from three sides. A concrete road reached the southern side of the village. This is the main path of the villagers to communicate with outside world. Recently a few shops including tea stall, grocery, tailor shop and a garage for auto rickshaw have been established from two sides in the end corner of the road making the area a small bazaar and the main meeting place of the villagers. Alongside these shops, two tea stalls have been established to the western side of *Dewan bari* (homestead) beside a mud road whereas another tea stall has been established to the southern side of *Dewan bari* beside an unpaved path and the bank of a pond. The youth and older men of the village, after their daylong hard work, get together in front of the tea stalls in the afternoon and spend time until the late evening

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<sup>1</sup> I should mention here that I did my master's thesis in 2000 and M. Phil thesis in 2011 in a gulf migrant village in Comilla, another migration prone district of southeastern part of Bangladesh. Again, I was born and brought up in a village in Comilla from where a large number of migrant workers migrated to different countries especially to the Middle East, Southeast and East Asian countries. Consequently, I have been observing the struggle of the members of migrant households and related social transformation for many years. I also have published three papers on three different issues of migration.

<sup>2</sup> Union Parishad is the smallest and the lowest administrative unit of local government. Each union is made up of nine wards. Each ward consists of one or more villages. A Union Parishad consists of a chairman, nine members for nine wards and three reserved women members who supervise three wards by each. The chairman and the members are elected by direct election. Union Parishad is responsible to oversee law and order and development activities of the government at local level.

<sup>3</sup> Upazila is a Local government unit in the middle of Union Parishad and district.

by chatting with one another and taking tea, biscuit, banana, bread etc. I joined many of their gatherings and listened to their ordinary conversations during the whole period of my fieldwork in the village.

Since the study deals with the gender sensitive issues of a rural Muslim society where women are kept under veil in the public place and where people are very much concerned about male female interaction, especially with outsiders, I had to think about my rapport and interaction with women especially who are alone in the absence of their husbands. Again, the cultural and religious norms of Bangladesh do not permit a man to talk with a woman individually in a separate place. To overcome this, I appointed a trained female researcher having a background in anthropology and gender studies to work as my assistant in the field. I talked to male members of the migrant, returned migrant and aspirant migrant households to know their feeling about women whilst she gathered information from women. Nevertheless, sometimes, I also talked with some women of migrant households depending on situation.

The physical structure of Rashidpur is different from surrounding villages. The homesteads of the village are separate from one another and they are like chunks where a large number of households are built in a small land area for which the villagers are concerned about the privacy of their movement while outsiders stay in the same homestead. For this reason, we conducted the fieldwork through our residence in the household of one of my friends in a nearby village which is half a kilometre away from Rashidpur. Since the village is not far away from our residence, we could stay in the village all day long, sometimes until the late evening to observe the natural movement and interaction of the villagers. We used to come back to our residence during lunch time and go back again before afternoon. We have conducted the study applying participant observation method as the main method along with a variety of other anthropological techniques such as census, Key Informant Interview (KII), in-depth interview, life story interview and informal group discussion with men and women of migrant, returned migrant and aspirant migrant households. In the beginning, we have conducted a census with both migrant and non-migrant households to have an overview of the village and to assess the basic changes in the migrant households. After the census, we have known that the village has 1404 people who are divided into 307 households of which 110 are migrant households from where 133 (127 men and 6 women) villagers have migrated to different countries especially to the Middle East, Southeast and East Asian countries to earn their living. We have also counted 55 returned migrants from 48 households. Most of the villagers are Muslims. There are six Hindu households where four have migrant men. Our respondents were selected using a variety of sampling techniques such as purposive sampling, snowball sampling or quota sampling depending on the issues of discussion. During the whole period of fieldwork we talked with men and women of different age and economic class to gain insights into transnational communication and gender based mobility of the villagers and their effect on the changes of women's agency and broader social structure overtime. Except the members of migrant, returned migrant and aspirant migrant households, we

also talked with the village leaders, *khadem*<sup>1</sup>, *imam*<sup>2</sup> primary school teachers, service holders, entrepreneurs and the like to get a comprehensive and clear picture about the changes in the village social organizations like household, homestead, lineage and society overtime. We did not record the conversation as we came to know that people do not speak from inner feeling in front of recorder. We also did not use camera without the permission of the villagers so that they can realize our honor to their privacy. In addition, before starting interview, we used to inform them clearly about the objective of the study and take their consent to collect data with a trustworthy rapport. Finally, I have used pseudonyms of all the informants and the village in the paper to protect their privacy.

Bangladesh is the 90<sup>th</sup> largest country in the world considering its landscape and the 8<sup>th</sup> largest country considering its population. Again, according to the density of population, it is the most densely populated country in the whole world. The latest estimates of the United Nations shows that the current population of the country is 16.53 million with a density of 1265 per square kilometer (<http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/bangladesh-population/>, accessed on 22.12.2017). But indicators such as illiteracy, unemployment and low per capita income demonstrate that it is one of the poverty stricken countries of the world. As a result, mobility and migration of people have significantly increased both within and outside of country to earn living. According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, the mobility of people has notably increased from 2012-2016. In the year 2016, per thousand 76 persons have moved within the country (Ittefaq report, May 30, 2017). Over the past few decades, Bangladesh has become one of the major labor sending countries from where approximately 500000 people join world labor market each year. According to Bangladesh Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), from 1976 to November 2017, in total 11388250 Bangladeshi people have migrated to more than 162 countries among which the top ten destination countries are Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Malaysia, Singapore and South Korea. But the flow of female migration is only 574,075 from the year 1976 to 2016 because of the prohibition on female migration from government at different times. Though Bangladesh received a decreased amount of remittance \$13.60 billion in the fiscal year 15-16, it earned the highest amount \$15.27 billion in the fiscal year 14-15 (<http://www.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/statisticalDataAction>; accessed on 22.12.2017). Therefore, at present, international aid agencies in Bangladesh lost their significance with the impressive growth of ready-made garments export industry and the rise of remittance largely from the Gulf States (Raitapuro & Bal 2016). Therefore the study of migration in Bangladesh has national significance and practical relevance.

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<sup>1</sup> Khadem is the caretaker of shrine. There are four shrines in Rashidpur.

<sup>2</sup> Imam is the religious leader who performs Muslim prayer in the mosque. There are two mosques in Rashidpur.

Though the overall destinations of the Bangladeshi migrants are Middle East, Southeast and East Asian countries, there are regional variations as some districts dominate migration to some countries. Migration to the industrialized West has a long history which dates back to the British colonial period. During the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, poor people from East Bengal (Chittagong and Noakhali) started working as labors in the British Merchant Navy which used to ship goods from Kolkata to all over the world. Likewise, poor peasants from Sylhet district got works in the dockyards of Hoogly near Kolkata and in the British Merchant Navy. Many of these sailors especially from Sylhet district jumped from the ships and disappeared when the ships landed in the United Kingdom or the United States of America. Many of the workers also joined the factory as labors in the UK by the help of the British Merchants (Gardner 1995; Sikder 2008). These workers are regarded as the pioneer migrants to the industrialized West. At present, Bangladeshi people continue to migrate to the West through different ways- as students and later acquiring work visas, as workers and through reunification of family. Among the Western countries, the United Kingdom and the United States are the major destinations where other important destinations are Italy, France, Greece, Spain, Belgium, Germany, Netherlands, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Japan (Sikder, 2008). Approximately 500,000 Bangladeshi people live each in the United Kingdom and the United States. According to the government officials and migration experts, more than 1.2 million Bangladeshi migrants are living in Western countries (Sikder, 2008).

After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, there has been a significant change in the pattern of migration from Bangladesh. Oil boomed Middle Eastern countries started major infrastructural development works in the beginning of 1970s for which they opened the floodgate of working opportunities for expatriate workers. Bangladesh government signed the contact with Arab states in 1976 when 6087 migrants left the country to join the workforce. By the late 1970s newly industrialized countries of the Southeast and East Asia- Malaysia, Singapore, Republic of Korea, Hong Kong and Japan also gradually attracted Bangladeshi migrant workers. Since then, the number of migrants has increased dramatically every year. But the pattern of migration to the Middle East, Southeast and East Asia is quite different from the West. Migration to the Middle East, Southeast and East Asia is short-term in nature with special job contract according to which the migrants must return home after the completion of the contract though a large number of migrants are staying abroad illegally for years. On the other hand, they get long term residence in the Western countries after which many get citizenship to the host countries (Sikder, 2008). Historical evidence shows that Sylhet, Chittagong and Noakhali districts dominate migration to the Western countries especially to the United Kingdom and the United States. As Sylhet district dominates migration to the United Kingdom, it is jokingly called the London of Bangladesh. On the other hand, Comilla, Chittagong, Brahmanbaria, Chadpur, Dhaka, Tangail, Noakhali and Munshiganj districts are known as royal districts because of migration to the Middle East, Southeast and East Asian countries. The district wise scenario of migration shows

that Munshiganj district is ranked as the eighth largest migration prone area where Comilla district stands the first position among the 64 districts in Bangladesh. According to Bangladesh Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), 705, 490 migrants went abroad from Comilla district between the year 2005 and 2016 whilst 193, 621 people migrated from Munshiganj district during the same period of time (<http://www.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/statisticalDataAction>; accessed on 22.12.2017). Munshiganj district has especial reputation among commoners for migration to the Southeast and East Asian countries like Japan, Republic of Korea, Singapore and Malaysia. Among the areas of Munshiganj district, Sirajdikhan upazila is well known for international migration where Rashidpur village is specially known for its remarkable change because of migration over the last few decades.

Migration of individuals leads to the questioning of existing orders (Gardner & Osella, 2003). The available researches conducted in Bangladesh and in South Asia focused on different issues and indicate a significant change in traditional social orders. The early studies consider migration as a modern phenomenon that brings modern values and practices in sedentary rural lives. Therefore, they link migration to the breakdown of rural community (Gardner & Osella 2003). Later, several studies link origin and destination of migration and consider it not only as a source of income but also of high status and power back in the village (Lefebvre 1999; Osella and Osella, 2003; Ali, 2007). A few studies also shed spotlights on the social and cultural changes in the left behind community (Gulati 1993). Existing studies on migration conducted in Bangladesh highlight the issue of remittance, economic development and changing status of migrant households (Siddiqui, 2003 & Gardner, 1995). While studying gender issue, some studies highlight on internal and international migration of women and link it to the changing position of women individuals both in the work and dwelling place (Sharma 1986; Kabeer, 2001; Dannecker, 2002). A few studies also focus on migration of man and link it to the social protection and higher status of women of the left behind households (Gardner 1995; Rashid 2009). Against this background, the objective of this paper is to explore the transformation in the patriarchal structure of Rashidpur village in Munshiganj district, Bangladesh following international migration of men leaving their women in the village. In doing so, this paper investigates into the continuity and changes in the discourse and practices of traditional gender roles and the development of agency among women in a patriarchal Muslim society. It also explores whether the practices are sustainable or temporal for a period when the husbands are abroad and what happens to the practices when the husbands permanently return. The study follows the idea of motility (Kaufmann, Bergman & Joye, 2004) to explore the effect of the migration of men and the mobility of left behind women on the transformation of social structure in Rashidpur village. It also contextualizes structure and agency of practice theory (Bourdieu 1977; Ortner 2006) to understand how patriarchal structure influences individuals and how individuals play a role to transform the structure in exchange through their mobility, activities and resistance when the migrants are abroad. Thus



the study is an endeavor to contribute to the field of feminism by identifying different forms of changing discourses and practices of a patriarchal Muslim society in rural Bangladesh.

### **Migration and Changing Pattern of Wedding**

There is no single wedding type in Bangladesh (Gardner, 1995; 163). Similarly, different types of weddings are found in Rashidpur village depending on the level of education, *gosthi* (lineage) tradition and financial condition of the households. The villagers whom I met informed me that most of the weddings are arranged by the guardians of both bride and groom. When a boy or a girl grows up, household members take decision to marry-in/marry off him/her. But the guardians of bride usually do not send proposal rather they take mental preparation and wait for proposals to come. On the other hand, the guardians of the groom may look for a suitable bride by themselves in or outside the village. If they find anyone, they may share their desire with a reliable person who may play role as an *ukil*<sup>1</sup> (matchmaker) or negotiator to arrange the marriage. If the *ukil* agrees, he/she contacts with the guardians of the potential bride. If the guardians concede, *ukil* and the representative of groom's party may see the bride usually in her natal house. At one point, the two parties sit together and settle down the transactions<sup>2</sup>. Marriage occurs after a few visits and exchange of opinions. Niamul (48), while taking tea in a tea stall, said to me that his elder brother, Mirajul (58) got married about 35 years back according to the desire of his father. At first, the father, accompanying one of his friends, informally visited the bride's house which is far away from Rashidpur village and selected the bride for his son. Later, the father, accompanying a few relatives

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<sup>1</sup> Ukil or a matchmaker is a person who brings bride and groom's party together and mediates the marriage. The people of Rashidpur belief that it is a divine duty; making a new relationship is equal to building a mosque. Gardner (1995) shows that *ukil* is the central figure for a marriage especially for the initial contacts.

<sup>2</sup> Sattar (50), a farmer told that one or two generation back, bride's family had to provide the groom's family with cash money and gifts. Groom's family also had to give *kabin* (a deed of marriage where the groom commits to pay the bride a certain amount of money in cash or in kind), ornaments and cloths to the bride in exchange. At present, because of the increase of literacy rate and economic improvement, the exchange of cash money has decreased but total expenditure has remarkably increased from both sides. These transactions include different kinds of expensive gifts like furniture, TV, refrigerator etc from bride's party. Groom's party also gives big amount of *kabin* and ornaments and expensive cloths. Alongside these, arrangement of lavish feasts are offered from both sides. The respondent again told that remittance and flow of cash money has a big impact on this change. Gardner (1995) also shows that transaction is never one-sided. Analyzing the present transaction in India, Rao (1993) told that households of better educated women pay more dowry than the households of less educated women. Their better financial condition allows them to pay more. In India, it is called 'groom price' with the higher demands for educated men seen as a reflection of higher value in marriage market. In the case of Bangladesh, in some cases, education has a positive impact on dowry as the educated girls more likely to marry without dowry. But it is also true that when dowry is paid for educated women, the amount is considerably higher than the price paid for less educated women. By contrast, higher proportion of women with no education pay dowry although the amount is small (Amin, 2008). This pattern involves the marriage strategies pursued by the parents of educated and non-educated women (Huq & Amin, 2001; Suran, Amin, Huq & Chowdhury, 2004).

and well-wishers, took Mirajul to show the bride. Mirajul saw the bride and told that he had respect on his father's choice. Hearing this, the guardians arranged the marriage instantly at the consecutive night. They came back home next day with the new wife. In another case, Mohsin (30), a migrant who came back home from Cyprus to visit his household members, talked with me at a sunny noon sitting under a tree in front of his house and informed me that he got married five years back when he visited his household members for six months. He saw five probable brides in different villages surrounding Rashidpur before taking the final decision. His household members and he started looking for a bride by the help of relatives, well-wishers or friends. He accompanied his brother-in-law during seeing the brides all the time. He paid a handsome amount of *bokshis*<sup>1</sup> (vail/cash money) each time to show honor to the probable brides. He paid the highest amount of *bokshis* to the bride whom he finally married. In a different case, my assistant and me talked with Tahmina (22), in one morning sitting in front of a neighboring house beside the house of her husband when her parents-in-law were away. She informed us that her marriage was a love marriage with Mizan (28), a migrant to Saudi Arabia. They fell in love of each-other two years back when she was studying in a college and Mizan came back from Saudi Arabia to visit Bangladesh for six months. Her natal house is a few villages away from Rashidpur. Once they got court marriage<sup>2</sup> without the permission of both of their parents. Her parents-in-law did not accept the marriage. In such situation her husband stealthily left the country for Saudi Arabia without informing her. Later her parents arranged a *shalis* (village arbitration) in Rashidpur where the village leaders ordered her parents-in-law to accept her. Afterwards, her parents-in-law permitted her to stay in their house. But her husband has not been maintaining any contact with her. At present, she is studying bachelor in a college and hoping to manage a job and waiting for her husband. Later, I have heard from a few young villagers that the marriage was not usual. Mizan was not willing to marry her but continue the love relation. But Tahmina was claiming that he was planning to abuse her. So, she made him compelled to marry.

The above cases indicate a remarkable change in the perception of wedding among the migrants and the young generation villagers. Many villagers told me that migrants see different patterns of male-female relation abroad and get motivated accordingly. They also share their ideas with their friends and household members by audio/video call on cell phone or when they visit home. In addition, the village has electricity connection

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<sup>1</sup> It is a norm to provide the potential bride with *bokshis* or vail by cash money when groom's party formally sees her for the first time. It is considered as a symbol of honor to the bride.

<sup>2</sup> Court marriage is a simple declaration. It is a kind of love marriage where Muslim bride and groom go to kazi (registrar of Muslim marriage) office to solemnize and registrar marriage and collect a receipt of marriage certificate. Afterwards, they go to an advocate to declare themselves as husband and wife by a 'Notary Public' and 'Affidavit'. Later the couple must collect the Nikah Nama (marriage certificate) from kazi office for legal protection. On the other hand, there is no particular instruction from the government of Bangladesh for Hindu/Buddhist/Christian marriage for which bride and groom go to City Corporation or priest or the administration of Temple/Church after solemnizing the marriage at Temple/Church (Israt Hasan, The Daily Observer; July 30, 2015).



since the early 1990s. At present, most of the migrant households have TV and android phone. Recently, dish antenna (satellite TV channels) has also entered into the village. Women watch TV while young generation people use mobile internet in their leisure time. Besides, Indian movie and TV serials have gained significant popularity among the women and grown up children. The Indian movie and TV serial reported to show the programs related to love story and internal household conflict. As a result, the idea of passionate relation or romantic love is increasing among the migrants and the young villagers. But parents and *gosthi* (lineage) elders do not accept romantic relation and love marriage because wedding is a means of social mobility to establish one's position in the society by making new affinal links (Gardner, 1995). Therefore, they accept only socially arranged marriage because it is linked to the prestige of household and *gosthi* members. They are especially concerned about the modesty and behavior of brides. While talking about wedding process, Hamid (45), a village leader told, "We like all the girls when they move in the street. But we cannot choose anyone when we look for a bride." In this regards, Gardner (1995, 162-63) argues that the reason behind this concern is that households compete in the village for status through marriage and plan to increase their social network upon the correct behavior of their daughter. Therefore the discourse and practices of weddings may be different to different individuals of the same households based of age and gender.

### **Household Composition**

Household is the smallest unit of village social organizations. Official definitions and existing village studies define household as a residential unit where family members, lodgers, borders or servants live and eat together (Ahmed, 2008). But the members of migrant households do not consider households only based on eating and living arrangement (Ahmed, 2008; Uddin, 2013a). Here the absent migrants are not only household members but also the head of the households by virtue of the position as the sole breadwinners. In many cases, the left behind household members live on remittances sent by the migrants who are far away from home. The migrants are physically absent but in actual sense they are present as household members or the main source of survival. The migrants and the left behind members maintain continuous contact in such a way that their interaction crosses the national boundary and turned into transnational (Gardner & Grillo, 2002; Uddin, 2013a). Parrenas (2001) says that migrants earn abroad while their household members perform the activities of reproduction, socialization and consumption in the village. Therefore migration plays an influential role in the transformation and reorganization of household composition. Migrant households in Rashidpur village show that the composition of households is malleable and continuously changing. I have talked with the members of migrant, returned migrant and aspirant migrant households and found a variety of compositions where most of the migrant households are temporarily managed by women in the absence of their men. The rest of the households are headed by men-father or brother. In some cases, married daughters and their children live in the households of their parents. In some exceptional cases,

divorced or widowed daughters take shelter in their natal households. Therefore it is impossible to generalize the consequences of migration on the composition of households. I have found the following variety of household composition in Rashidpur village.

Table 1: Composition of Migrant Households in Rashidpur Village:

Composition of Household
Husband + Wife
Husband + Wife + Children
Husband+ Wife+ Children+ Married daughter
Husband + Wife+ Children+ Divorcee daughter
Husband + Wife + Children + Mother of Husband
Husband+ Wife+ Children+ Father of Husband
Husband + Wife + Children +Married Sibling + Parents and Widowed Sister of Husband
Husband + Wife + Children + Married Sibling + Mother of Husband
Husband + Wife + Children + Unmarried Sibling + Parents of Husband
Husband + Wife + Children + Married Sibling + Unmarried Sibling + Parents of husband
Husband + Wife + Children + Married Sibling + Unmarried Sibling + Mother of husband
Husband + Wife + Children + Married Sibling + Parents and Grandmother of husband

Source: Fieldwork, 2017

The villagers divide the composition of households broadly into two categories- *bhinno* (nuclear) and *ekloge* (joint). But their definition is different from Western construction 'nuclear' and 'joint'. Gardner found in Talukpur that nuclear household consists of husband, wife and their children and joint household consists of parents, their married children (usually sons) and their spouses and children, plus daughters who are divorced/separated or widowed (1995: 102). In the case of Rashidpur, usually, the members of a household are family members; but its membership is open where relatives may be included. In most of the cases, *bhinno* households consist of married couple and/or their children. Sometimes, single parent of husband may be included. Married daughter may also be included if her husband is abroad. Likewise, divorced or widowed daughter may also be included if she is single. An old widower and an old widow got married after the death of their previous couple. The husband is now 70 years old while the wife is 62. On the other hand, *ekloge* households consist of parents, married sons and their couples and children. Sometimes, married daughter and her children may also be included if her husband is abroad. Sometimes,

divorced or widowed daughters and their children may also live there. Household composition of Rashidpur village shows that in both of the categories, one or more relative of both couple typically of the husbands may be included depending on situation. Therefore, it is important to know how local people themselves explain the composition because different individuals have different interest in decision making within the household (Gardner, 1995).

Household structure is usually in peak when sons get married-in, their wives work under the direction of the mother-in-law and the daughters are married off. Father belongs to land property and supervises household issues; but this does not mean that he plays active role in all household affairs. His pattern of involvement also depends on his personality. If he is illiterate, old or unwilling to lead the household, mother or sons manage from behind the scenes. Again, if the son is migrant and breadwinner of the household, authority of father decreases (Ahmed, 2008). Usually a household is divided after the death of both parents. But it is found in Rashidpur that, in many cases, households divide after the death of the father or even when both parents are alive.

Ahmed (2008) shows that although the common perception in rural Bangladesh is that household separation takes place due to expansion cycle when 'nuclear' units gets extended with the progression of time and gets divided after the death of household head, this assumption is very simple because household separation is related to a number of socio-economic and psychological factors which are not necessarily related only to expansion cycle. In this connection, he argues that households may split because of increased number of members with the expansion of time, lack of space, conflict among the members and so on. Similarly, Van Schendel (1981) shows that intergenerational power conflicts between father and his son or between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law causes the division of joint households. While talking about migrant households, Gardner (1995; 99) shows that the effect of migration on household composition widely varies; in some places, it is associated with the breakdown of household structure whereas in other places it may be linked to joint arrangement. In fact, the absence of migrants brings various changes in internal roles of household members from beginning to the end. Sharma argues that migration is a household process (Sharma, 1986). It affects all the household members both migrant and non-migrant. The members of migrant households informed me that migration is a big investment for their future. They select the most enterprising and duteous son for migration so that he can help other brothers to migrate and hence improve the economic condition of the household. Therefore, prior to migration, the migrants and their household members idealize migration as a source of prosperity and unity among them and consider that economic advancement is ensured and definite after migration. But I found in my M.Phil study that household is a unit of power exercise where male, female, adult, children, migrant and non-migrant individuals enjoy uneven authority on remittance and household decisions (Uddin 2013a). As a result, a psychological discord emerges when he cannot fulfill

their demand according to aspiration. If the migrant is married, conflict emerges between his wife and other members which induces household breakup in the long run. Contrarily, Gardner and Bashar argue that migration plays a significant role in keeping households together because the members link it to unity and economic prosperity (Gardner, 1995, Bashar, 2009). Gardner worked in a village where most of the migrants went to the UK and Bashar worked in a village where most of the migrants migrated to Italy. Since UK and Italian migrants earn more, there is less tension in the household and hence there is less conflict among the members. But the scenario is different in Rashidpur because the migrants are poor most of whom migrated to the Middle East, Southeast and East Asia to work as labors. Here the migrants bear the burden of large households by their little and irregular earnings. Therefore, sometimes, it is difficult for them to manage three square meals for the left behind household members. Sometimes, it creates constant dissension among the members back in the village. Consequently, in many cases, the households which are not financially solvent start to get divided from the previous unit.

While I was talking with Shajahan (46), a returned migrant from Saudi Arabia, sitting in a tea stall, he identified the following reasons of household breakup in his village:

Relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is the principal cause of household break up.

Unequal remittance of migrant brothers creates dissension among the left behind household members especially the wives of the migrants whose husbands contribute more than other brothers.

Unequal distribution of parental resources creates tension among the brothers which induces household break up.

During purchasing land or household assets, all brothers have to contribute equally. But it is difficult to exclude a brother in *ekloge* household even if he does not contribute at all for which household may get divided.

Sometimes, fathers may mutually break up the households and distribute lands among the sons and daughters before their death to avoid future conflict in their absence.

Likewise, while I was talking with Milon (35), a service holder in Dhaka, sitting under a tree in a corner of his homestead, he identified the following additional reasons of rapidly growing tendency of household breakup:

In *ekloge* household one or two members earn money whereas the others live idle lives and remain dependent. But now because of continuous price hiking of commodities, expense of daily life has increased in such a level that it is difficult to live life in traditional way.

Husband considers grandparents, parents and grandchildren as household members whereas wife counts only husband and children as her household members because

she is more concerned about the future of her own unit. The reason of this difference in thinking is that the wife does not know the history of struggle how her parents-in-law raised her husband from childhood. Therefore, the wife tries to convince her husband to concentrate on their own unit.

Sofura (50), a mother-in-law, told my assistant that the new generation wives know the art of exposing love to their husbands in more passionate ways. Therefore, they can motivate their husbands to concentrate on their own parts forgetting their parents. Consequently, conflict arises between parents-in-law and daughters-in-law which leads to the breakup of the households. Likewise, I have heard from many villagers that there is a generation gap between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in understanding rights and freedom. Literacy rate has considerably increased among the new generation wives. Moreover the availability of android phone, internet or TV program and opportunities to move in the public sphere have broadened the horizon of their thinking for which they have different views about privacy, freedom and responsibilities. As a result, mothers-in-law cannot control their daughters-in-law as they did in previous generations.

### **Household Decision**

Decision making pattern of the migrant households in Rashidpur is diversified depending on their composition and internal relation among the members (Gardner, 1995). While my assistant and me were talking with Kusum (42), sitting in her house, she told that her husband lives in Malaysia for 15 years. The husband sends money to her bank account and depends on her for household decisions. They take decision by mutual sharing. She has been playing active role in household decision since her marriage. The husband believes that she understands better and takes better decision than him. On the contrary, in another case, while my assistant was talking with Ira (28) sitting in her kitchen, she informed that her husband lives in Singapore and sends some amount to her account for household expenditure. He sends the rest of his earning to his personal account in Bangladesh for saving. He gives detailed instructions how to spend the money and takes all the decisions over the phone during sending remittance. Ira further informed that her husband does not like to share all the financial issues with her the reason why she does not demand more money and accepts whatever amount he sends. In a different case, Seema (20) is a new wife in an *ekloge* (joint) household where her father-in-law is the head and takes all the decisions. While talking with my assistant sitting in her husband's house in the absence of parents-in-law, she informed that her husband lives in Saudi Arabia for three years and sends remittance to her father-in-law, who, talking with his migrant son, takes all the household decisions, goes for shopping and spends the money accordingly. She further informed that, sometimes, she even does not know when her husband sends money. Her husband does not send money separately for her personal expense. She only receives some amount from her father-in-law in each 2/3 months for personal expense.

The above cases illustrate how the women of different age and different household composition have different involvement in household decisions. Likewise, I have heard from several villagers that the remittance in the *ekloge* households is receipt mostly by father or a bother and in some exceptional cases, by mother or an elder sister. Decisions of these households are taken by mutual discussion between the migrants and the recipients over the phone. The wives of *ekloge* households do not have active role in household decisions especially when they are young. On the other hand, the women of *bhinno* households have assertive role in household decisions but this also varies depending on conjugal relation. They further informed that the position of women changes gradually overtime after the birth and with the growth of their children especially male child.

Similarly, I have heard from many men and women in the village that when the children begin to grow up, gradually the women get concerned about the future of their children and the households as a whole. When they see that the neighboring children are getting better education, wearing better cloths and enjoying a better life, they get worried thinking the future of their own children. They also get concerned about personal freedom when they see the next-door women to deal with cash and move in the public places. Therefore, they consult with their husbands and convince them to migrate if they have not gone abroad yet. They also try to manage the capital of migration by selling their ornaments or borrowing money from their parents, brothers, sisters, maternal uncles or any close relative. They also play important role in repaying the money to the borrowers. The women feel proud if their husbands live abroad as it is a symbol of status and financial wellbeing. They may do the same during the migration of their sons. The respondents further informed that the women of previously poor and now well-off households are more willing to get involved in migration process and negotiate household decisions and establish their agency.

My assistant talked with Zulekha (28) sitting beside her at a noon when she was cooking rice in her kitchen. She told that her husband, Najir (35) was almost unemployed in the village before his migration and they were living in a *bhinno* (nuclear) household. When her first son started school and the daughter started walking, gradually she got concerned about the future of the children. Once, she began to convince her husband to go abroad so that they can properly educate their children. The husband was ambivalent because he could not afford migration cost. In such situation, she sought help from her parents and migrant brothers to manage a visa. Afterwards, one of her brothers who lives in Malaysia managed a visa which costed BDT 350,000. The husband managed BDT 200,000 by selling two cow and taking loan on interest. She managed the rest amount by selling her ornaments and borrowing from another migrant brother. The husband has been living in Malaysia for three years. Zulekha receives BDT 20000-25000 remittance every month and takes household decisions by mutual sharing with husband over the phone. They spent the initial remittance to repay the loans. Now they are planning to make a brick built house.



## **Mobility and Agency of Women**

Migration of men brings various changes in the life of women who are left behind in the village. Gardner (1995) finds various discourses and practices of gender identity in her migration study. Likewise, I have found multiple gender identity, discourses and related practices in Rashidpur village. Contrary to this idea, many scholars have identified Bangladeshi women as homogenous category and gender relation as unchanging (Gardner, 1995; 200). Until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the third world women were treated as victims of patriarchy. But this idea has increasingly been criticized by the feminist scholars (Mohanty, 1988). White (1992) argues that Western middle class researchers conducted researches in Bangladesh and treated women as homogenous and passive victims of patriarchy. Their main intention was to create an aid oriented discourse which treats the situation of third world women as a problem that can be solved by aid-agency funded by the West. Gardner (1995, 201) shows that the women in Bangladesh are less powerful than men in many ways because they have less access to resources and public domain. They also do not have access to mosque and village arbitration. But the findings in Rashidpur village indicate that though women have less access to land ownership, they practice power in various ways at household level. Therefore we should explore how women strategize to establish their identity and agency as individuals.

To explore the diversity of the impact of migration and mobility at individual level I have followed the idea of motility propagated by Kaufmann et al (2004). Motility is the combination of spatial and social mobility which are interchangeable and interdependent. They have considered motility as an asset. According to this idea, different individuals have different access to motility that refers to both vertical and horizontal dimension of social position. They again indicate that motility creates a new form of social inequality because of unequal access to spatial and social mobility which creates fundamental changes in all aspects of social structure. Along with this, I have follow the perception of practice theory (Bourdieu, 1977; Ortner, 2006) to understand how patriarchal structure influences individuals and how individual play role to transform the structure in exchange through their continuous interaction with each other. I have also pursued Gardner's (1995) idea of ethnographic writing to understand the diversity of rural life. Following these theoretical ideas, I have explored how migration of men creates opportunity for women to deal with remittance and move in the public sphere that changes their vertical and horizontal position which ultimately develop their agency as individuals.

Migration brings radical changes in the female identity of village women as they perform household and outside works. I have heard from many men and women that in recent time, mobility of women in public places has become a common

phenomenon in the locality because of migration. But they need to maintain *pardah*<sup>1</sup> which is mainly practiced by wearing *burka*<sup>2</sup> in public sphere. Though *pardah* is considered as a means of subordination in Western society, Gardner (1995; 218) shows in the case of her Talukpur study in Sylhet, Bangladesh that it always creates status for women themselves because they get more public prestige than those who do not maintain *pardah*. As the poverty stricken women need to go outside for wage work, they cannot maintain *pardah* and hence cannot enjoy expected public prestige. She further shows that *pardah* related behavior is important for women's spirituality because it brings them closer to Allah (219). But in the case of Rashidpur, *pardah* and *burka* are interchangeable in practice because wearing *burka* is equated as maintaining *pardah* in many cases. Therefore, *pardah* has its own local and cultural version in Rashidpur as the women do not follow the original ideology of *pardah*. Though they wear *burka* most of them do not cover face like many Arabian women. They wear *burka* when they move outside in front of strangers but they move freely without *burka* in the homestead in front of male neighbors. Again, many of them do not follow other aspects of Islamic life; rather they lead a liberal life which has its own cultural version. The men and women whom I have talked mentioned a number of reasons and benefits of wearing *burka* in public place. They have said that they do not need many expensive, new and washed cloths to go outside if they wear *burka* on the top. Again, nobody can recognize them from far if they cover themselves by *burka* for which they can freely move in the public place without hesitation. Outside men also show respects when they wear *burka*. As a result, they get the opportunity to move in the public place and redefine their gender role. But still the meaning of female identity and *pardah* are different to the women of different age and class.

The role of class is also widely recognized in the study of South Asian gender (Sharma, 1986, White, 1992). Sometimes, I saw some women to work without *burka* with men in the field during plantation and harvesting of potato<sup>3</sup>. But Jalal (58), an employer of a group of men and women labors told that no women of Rashidpur work in the field as wage labors. The women who work in the field either come from neighboring villages or from the districts of north Bengal. He also informed that many women come with their husbands from the northern districts of Bangladesh and stay in the homestead of wealthiest households of the locality to work during plantation and harvesting season. Western feminists link non-domestic work to gender equality. But in rural Bangladesh the women who work outside do not enjoy increased power in the households because they do not control resources in the households (Gardner,

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<sup>1</sup> *Pardah* is a set of inner feelings and an ideology that secludes Muslim women from public sphere. By separating male and female sphere, it actually creates interdependence (Jeffery, 1973; 13). It focuses on physical separation and women's need for male shelter (Papanek, 1973).

<sup>2</sup> *Burka* is a long garment that covers the whole body from head to feet. Muslim women wear *burka* when they go to public places. It is used to maintain *pardah* in public sphere.

<sup>3</sup> Munshiganj district is very famous for producing potato. Whilst many other districts of Bangladesh emphasize on paddy, people of Rashidpur and surrounding villages produce mainly potato. Many villagers told that potato is more profitable than paddy or other crops.

1995). Similarly, Sharma argues (1986) that if women work in public place but do not control resources, they can change their status neither in the household nor in the public spheres. As a result, we cannot consider that the women who work as wage earners or who manage households without adult men are more equal to men than women of the wealthiest households (Hartmann & Boyce, 1983). In this regard, Gardner (1995) shows that, women's power and status in Bangladesh are dependent upon their access to resources and support from male counterparts. She again argues that the absence of women from public sphere does not indicate women's vulnerability rather it is a symbol of high status of a household. She argues that it is the wealthiest households which can withdraw their women from production and practice women's exclusion. She further indicates that outside mobility of daughters is very important to build marital alliance with 'better' husbands. This is seen in the most 'honor' and 'shame' societies where the higher the status of households, the more modest women appears to be. In this regard, she shows that the women of the wealthiest households who maintain more *pardah* have more economic, political and symbolic power than the women of poorer households because seclusion is a symbol of status for them. But in the context of Rashidpur the scenario is different when the question comes about the contribution in household decision and freedom of mobility in the public sphere. I have found various discourses and practices of gender identity in Rashidpur among the rich, newly rich, middle class and poor villagers. Here, poverty stricken women do not wear *burka* because they need to go outside for work. Wives of the traditionally rich households usually do not go to public places if their travel is not a must. While talking with my assistant, Nazma (35), a wife of a rich *ekloge* (joint) household told, "I take permission from my parents-in-law if I need to go outside. I also take permission from my migrant husband and my parents-in-law when I go to natal home. I cannot go outside the homestead without their permission." On the other hand, Kusum (42), the wife of a newly rich migrant household told my assistant and me that, "My husband never suspects if I go to public places. Sometimes, I accompany my neighboring women when they need help to go to hospital or bazaar on big occasions." In this regard, Miron (45), an electrician told that the migrants who were poor and now are well-off because of remittance, permit their women more to move in the public places than the men who were rich before migration. The study in Rashidpur village reveals that women who were poor before migration and now are well off are the most able to negotiate and redefine their social roles in their favor. I have heard from many villagers that the wives of *bhinno* households who were poor before migration but now are rich have better bargaining and decision making power within and outside homestead. On the other hand, women of rich but *ekloge* households grow up within the restriction of *pardah* for which they remain submissive though they have strong male support. I have heard from several women that the women who can move in the public places undermine the women of the richest but *ekloge* households because they cannot go outside and take decisions on their own.

Women's practice of power and freedom of mobility is linked to their age, wealth and the number of sons. Junior wives may find it difficult to strategize their position as they remain under the control of parents-in-law and their behavior is closely watched because their behavior is the symbol of honor and purity (Gardner, 1995; 204). While talking with my assistant in the absence of her parents-in-law, Seema (20), a new wife of a rich migrant household told,

*"I need to take permission from parents-in-law to go to my natal home. My husband advised me to listen to my parents-in-law without any argument. I like to go to public sphere but I have permission neither from husband nor from parents-in-law."*

But mobility of these women is slowly accepted after they give birth to children, especially male child. Gardner (1995) shows that as women grow older and pass menopause, the restriction of *pardah* are gradually loosened. She shows that women enjoy more power when their sons get married because they have the chance to control their daughter-in-law. Again, after passing menopause, they can freely move in the village road unaccompanied. The village men also respect them as elders. But again, this depends on the support of husband and adult sons (Gardner, 1995; 214). I have found the similar scenario in Rashidpur village.

Migration affects the mobility of different women in different ways depending on age, personality, conjugal relation and household composition. Several wives of *ekloge* (joint) but rich households said that they remain under the supervision of their parents-in-law and other male members of the households. Their mobility is not welcomed by the norms and values of their households because their mobility is regarded as dishonorable for their household men. The young women of these households pass through public places wearing *burka* only when they travel between natal and husbands' homesteads. Otherwise, they stay at home and perform merely household activities. On the other hand, many wives of *bhinno* (nuclear) households told that they go to public places in the absence of their husbands on different occasions-for shopping, visiting banks or school. A few wives said that they may bring commodities by men if there is any reliable and close one like father-in-law, brother-in-law or uncle-in-law. Sometimes, male members of the natal households of the wives may also help if their homesteads are not far. But I have also heard from many men and women that women do not like the shopping when other people buy for them. Moreover, they cannot maintain financial calculation accurately when other people buy their commodities. So, they like to go to purchase things by themselves. Sokon (55), a returned migrant and at present a shopkeeper in the village, told that the tendency of mobility of women is increasing day by day seeing one another. He has further informed that the highest tendency of mobility of women is seen during two Eids (Eid of Ramadan and Eid of sacrificing cattle). But Kader (58), a fisherman said that women do not have strong bargaining power for which they buy items with higher prices. The shopkeepers know that the husbands of these women live abroad and they have cash flow for which they offer cold drinks, tea, biscuits etc to the women

and their accompanied kids as a strategy to decrease their bargaining power and make them permanent customers.

I have heard from many villagers that although the mobility of women is accepted, it is widely believed that without a grown up men nearby, women are vulnerable to different kinds of sexual harassment. Again, if the nearby men are not close relatives, the villagers suspect the mixing and endeavor to breathe the smell of extra-marital relation. Likewise, women's interaction with outsider men in public places is observed with detecting eyes. Khodeja (30), the wife of a migrant told, *"I always take one of my kids to accompany me when I go to bazaar. I never go alone so that nobody suspects.* But some women are brave enough to neglect the observation and move when they need. Shirina (35), the wife of another migrant told, *"If we are always anxious about the surveillance of others, we cannot work outside. Honesty is a personal issue."* Along with this, when I explored the sustainability of the changed practices when the migrants permanently return, many members of returned migrant households informed that the women go back to their household duties as they do not have reason to go outside when their husbands permanently return. But still they can contribute better to household decisions. Their husbands can go to urban area or other places keeping their wives alone at home like before. Therefore, the experiences of the wives have practical implication in the long run.

## **Conclusion**

The consequence of migration is complex and unpredictable. It brings significant changes and reformation in the familial and social life in some cases whereas in other cases, it does not bring remarkable change in traditional practices (Gardner, 1995). Migration of men brings remarkable changes in the composition of households. Female education has notably increased among the new generation wives. Alongside this, transnational communication and the entrance of cell phone, TV and dish antenna (satellite TV channels) in the village have widened the horizon of the rights and freedom of women. As a result, many young generation wives like to come out of the domination of their in-laws and live in separate households instead of previous joint arrangement. In order to implement their desire to be separate, they try to convince their husbands to think about the future of their children and their own unit instead of all the members of the household. The migrants also, sometimes, find it difficult to bear the living costs of large households by their inadequate and irregular earnings. In such situation, parents and siblings of the migrants feel discontent and insecure though once they welcomed migration for their prosperity. This psychological discord gradually creates continuous tension and conflict which induces household break up.

The study reveals that women who were poor before migration and now are well off are the most able to negotiate and redefine their social roles in their favor. It shows that because of the migration of men, mobility and decision making power of women, especially the women of *bhinno* households have remarkably increased. To move in

the public spheres, the women strategically wear *burka* to uphold their personal image and to make their mobility easy. So, migration is linked to the increased practice of *burka* but it is not always the signs of subordination since it has local and cultural meanings to the villagers. Nonetheless, many women of the wealthiest but *ekloge* households still follow the traditional norms and values while their father-in-law, brother-in-law or other men perform their outside work in the absence of their husbands. As a result, the women who can move in the public places undermine the women of the richest but *ekloge* households because they cannot go outside and take decisions on their own. But many women remain stressful as they have to manage households and public sphere alone by themselves. Nonetheless, many of them enjoy this time as they can deal with cash, go to public spheres and buy necessary items as they like. Therefore, their experiences of working both in private and public sphere make them capable to reshape and rearrange their traditional cultural boundaries and establish their agency. When their husbands return permanently from abroad they go back to their traditional duties in the households because they do not have reasons to go to public places. But still their husbands can go to urban area or other places keeping them alone at home like before. So, their experiences have practical implication in the long run.

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