

# Time to look at girls. Adolescent girls' migration in Bangladesh

## Summary



### *Background of the study*

Between January 2014 and December 2015, the research project entitled “Time to look at girls: Adolescent girls’ migration and development” was carried out in Bangladesh. It is part of a comparative research project that includes research in Ethiopia and Sudan and was carried out under the umbrella of the **Global Migration Centre of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies** in Geneva, Switzerland. The overall research project is funded by the **Swiss Network for International Studies (SNIS)**. The Bangladesh case study has been carried out in partnership with **RMMRU** and with the logistic and administrative support of **Terre des Hommes (TDH) Italy Bangladesh Country Office**. Additionally, the project was supported by Terre des Hommes, the University of Sussex in the United Kingdom, Feminist Review Trust and ZXY International.

The research focuses on the experiences, life choices and aspirations of adolescent girls and young women who migrate internally and internationally. It specifically looked at the life course and at how the decision to migrate intersects with other important choices which characterize adolescence: those related to education, marriage and having children. It aims to provide insights into young women and adolescent girls’ aspirations and decision-making capacity, as well as into the changes in young women’s self-perception and status resulting from migration. The research also looked at the impact of migration on family members left behind. These interests in the longer-term impacts of adolescent girls’ migration meant that, while all the research respondents had migrated as adolescents, only a minority were adolescents at the time they were interviewed.





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## *Methodology*

A common methodology was adopted across the different country case studies. Data was collected using mixed multi-methods approach and privileging a qualitative approach to ensure the participation and involvement of migrant girls. The fieldwork in Bangladesh took place between January and December 2014. It was carried out by Dr. Nicoletta Del Franco, supported by a research team composed of a research assistant, a counsellor from ARBAN (Association for Realization of Basic Needs), a project coordinator from TDH Italy and 5 adolescent girls who helped with administering the questionnaires.

In Bangladesh, 60 survey questionnaires and 16 life stories with migrants and 7 focus group discussions (FGDs) with groups of migrants, 6 expert interviews with representatives of local and international NGOs working on issues related to internal migration and adolescence were conducted.

The research focused on women who had migrated from rural areas to Dhaka when they were under 20 years of age (and mainly under 18) and looked at two main groups in particular: young women and girls working in the garment manufacturing sector, and beauticians who are employed in 'beauty parlours'.

The first group of respondents consisted of 47 Bengali migrants, who ranged in age from 12 to 34 at the time of the study. This group included mostly women who have worked or are working in the garment sector and a minority of women who have worked or are working in sectors other than the garment industry. Most of the interviews with this group took place in the residence of the migrants in the two slums of Bau-niabandh and Bhola, in Pallabi, Mirpur at the outskirts of Dhaka at the presence of peers and other slum residents.

The second group of migrants, those working in beauty parlours, comprises 13 girls and young women belonging to the Garo ethnic minority. They were accessed directly by visiting the beauty parlours.

Contrary to the initial plan to interview 30 recent migrants and 30 older ones who had 10 or more years of residence at destination, we could interview only 17 (11 Bengali, 6 Garo) migrants who had been living in Dhaka for more than 10 years, while the majority of the respondents, 37 (33 Bengali, 4 Garo) had migrated up to 5 years before.

The fieldwork was carried out in three phases. Between January and April 2014 and in August 2014 we interviewed migrants residing in Pallabi, Mirpur. Between November-December 2014 we visited the villages of origin of some of the migrants in Netrakona and Bogra district.

Netrakona district was chosen because it includes the hilly northern areas where the Garo migrants come from and Bogra district was chosen because of the profound rapport that over the year was established with 2 girls coming from that area.

In Bogra district we visited the households of 5 Bengali migrants and in Netrakona those of two Garo and 1 Bengali migrant. We also visited 4 high schools where we had informal group discussions with students and teachers.





## Key findings

### *Reasons for migration and the decision to migrate*

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

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

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

Some girls moved to Dhaka to escape difficult family situations: they did not get along with a step mother or step father, felt uncared for or were mistreated. Only a few claimed that they wanted to gain some freedom, do something for themselves and/or avoid to be married early.

*'When I was 6-7 years old my father married for the second time. My step mum did not like me. I did a lot to be accepted but I was beaten all the time. I got angry because of all that violence and I left'.*

5 girls who mentioned the failure of their marriage among the reasons for their migration share similar experiences. They married at a very young age between 12 and 14 and got divorced or separated after realizing that their husband was married already or because of abuse and mistreatment by husband and in-laws.





*'They married me off when I was very little. At that time I was just busy playing, when they told me that someone was coming to see me I cried a lot... My mother in law started from the beginning mistreating me, I was crying a lot... after the divorce I stayed in my home village for 3 months at my elder brother's place, but I didn't like it... my sister in law was looking at me in such a way... so I came to Dhaka'.*

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

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

#### *Migration trajectories*

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

#### *Being an adolescent in an urban slum*

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

Living in Dhaka, potentially provides more opportunities for girls to develop a network of female and male friends, than living in a village. This is facilitated by working side by side in the factory, by the lack of parental control and the use of mobile phones. However, when it comes to relationships with boys and men the fear of losing one's reputation with behaviours contrary to the recognised social norms is significant. Girls





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are afraid of or have experienced being cheated by young and older suitors. Some were married by men to gain some sort of economic advantage, while claiming to be 'in love'. Moreover, being far away from their place of origin and not having the protection of an older 'guardian', girls are more vulnerable to eve-teasing, violence and abuse than girls who are born in the slum and live with their parents and male siblings. As a result most of the migrant girls do not take advantage of the opportunities that the city might offer, tend to keep a very restrained attitude and claim that they will get married back in their village only when their parents arrange it. Those who step out of the social norms risk incurring harsh sanctions (extortion, forced marriages) by local gangs of youngsters who are linked to locally powerful people and/or risk being trafficked into brothels in Bangladesh and abroad.

### *Marriage and migration*

The research points to diverse situations for Bengali girls.

**One**, migration can contribute to postpone marriage: those who had never married declared that they expected to return home in the space of a few years and marry. Some of them claimed that if they hadn't migrated they would have probably been already married. The research indicates that migration for work in the capital may constitute for poor parents a possible alternative to marrying their daughters in their early teens.

**Two**, a failed marriage together with the lack of economic resources of the family of origin is among the triggers of migration for young women. A divorce/separation brings shame and damages the reputation of the girl and of the girl's family and diminishes the chances of a second marriage in the same area. Migration is a means of escaping the social stigma, increases the probability of remarrying for the girl (by starting afresh and pretending to be unmarried at destination) and transforms the girl into an asset rather than a liability for the family of origin.

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

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

### *Perceived Positive Impacts Of Migration*

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







claimed that with migration they have become more 'clever', capable to stand on their own feet and to manage their daily lives. Those who married at destination identify marriage and having children as having a positive impact on their personal situation.

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

### *Particular vulnerabilities of migrant girls*

Migrants and the non-migrant Bengali girls share the same constraints in terms of mobility, possibility of cross-gender interaction, the same risks in terms of physical and sexual violence and ultimately the same social sanctions when and if they do not conform to the social norms that regulate the transition to adulthood, sexuality and marriage. Girls' mobility is very restricted and those who step openly out of the gender order run the risk of being stigmatized as 'bad' girls as well as to be easy target of traffickers and small criminals. In the social context of urban slums there is no space for the development of a safe adolescent/youth culture except than in the virtual realm of Internet and mobile phones.

While this is true for all adolescent girls, the research uncovered many difficult experiences that suggest that migrant adolescents are more vulnerable than their non-migrant counterpart in many respects: they are new to the city and the slums and in most cases they lack the protective support of familial networks. They are sometimes fleeing difficult circumstances in their home communities.

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

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

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



## *Key implications for policy and intervention*

### ● *Safer migration*

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

### ● *Safe spaces and wider social networks*

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

### ● *Promoting discussion and challenging stereotypes about gender, sexuality and sexual violence*

Awareness raising activities, action research and other initiatives are needed to work with mixed gender groups, boys and men, community leaders, parents and social workers on issues related to gender relations and gender violence, marriage, sexuality in order to bring to discussion themes and issues otherwise considered beyond scrutiny and relegated to an untouchable realm of 'culture'. This would make the hidden and parallel world of what are so far considered 'illegal' interactions among young people, a legitimate and possible reality to deal with, would allow to sanction violent behaviour, support the victims of violence and develop a culture of mutual respect among young people.

### ● *Improving access to services for migrant girls*

- Strengthening existing interventions targeting adolescent girls and making them more inclusive; one easy measure in this respect would be to extend service providers and NGOs offices' opening times to Fridays and evenings so that migrant working girls can access them.

- Provide information on all the different services and facilities available in the area: including possibilities of schooling (for example Bangladesh Open University), basic skills training, health related facilities and on the presence in the area of residence of different kind of service providers like NGOs, Unions, microcredit groups.

- Providing migrant girls counselling/mentoring to mitigate their sense of loneliness and isolation and psycho-social support especially in cases of girls at risks of abuse or victims of violence.

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