

MIGRATION, MARRIAGE AND INTRA-HOUSEHOLD DYNAMICS: LESSONS FROM BANGLADESH, GHANA AND INDONESIA



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Main messages

- Households are the places where the effects of migration are felt, and they are the sites prompting men and women to migrate
- Differing norms in Bangladesh, Ghana and Indonesia regulate women's access to internal and transnational migration
- Each of the studies challenge the common assumption that men are providers and women are care-givers
- The gendered effects of migration expand way beyond consideration of the sex of the person who travels
- Norms sketching men and women's social positions and responsibilities are negotiated through migration, gradually beginning to unsettle inequalities in marital relationships.
- When women experience having more voice, choice and control as migrants and as remittance managers, they try to avoid returning to their former subordinate position

Background

In its 2015 development strategy, the UK government emphasises the importance of mainstreaming women and girls' empowerment in its programmes to tackle extreme poverty and assist the most vulnerable people. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development also aims to achieve gender equality by increasing women and girls' access to economic and sustainable growth and to education, health, and justice. To achieve these aims the Department for International Development (DFID) strategically works to increase women and girls' voice, choice and control. Thus, DFID works to raise the participation in decision-making processes at all levels of society for girls and women; improve women's ability to complete education, benefit from paid work and make choices about their own lives; and, to increase women's control over their bodies and their own mobility.

Yet, efforts to tackle violence against girls and women, as well as harmful practices like female genital mutilation and early or forced marriage, frequently result in framing girls and women as victims and particularly vulnerable. When women and girls are constructed as belonging to a uniform social category little attention is paid to gendered social relations or the structural power dynamics at play in the labour market, local communities and the private sphere of households.

Understanding the relations between women and men is vital to address issues of inequality. These dynamics stem from the identities, roles, and areas of responsibility associated with women and men of different ages and abilities. Social constructions such as these are internalised to varying degrees by individuals and, although women and girls often are categorised as of lesser worth, men and boys are also under pressure to perform in accordance with the roles and responsibilities associated with their gender and age. Changes that shift the dynamics between women and men may prepare the ground for empowerment but are just as likely to trigger resistance and negotiation.

Our contribution to existing knowledge

Gender norms are often seen as impacting negatively on girls and women, limiting their ability to capitalise on economic possibilities in migration. Mainstream advocacy encourages a focus on increasing the voice, choice, and control for girls and women. The three case studies from Bangladesh, Ghana and Indonesia of internal and transnational labour migration highlight gendered aspects of the decision-making surrounding migration, the use of remittances, and other outcomes at the household level. They offer surprising insights into how migration and remittance use mesh with gender dynamics within marriage.

Methods

The Intra-Household Dynamics project is a comparative, qualitative study with case studies in Bangladesh, Ghana, and Indonesia. Relying on baseline household information collected in quantitative surveys in 2013-2014, the study involved two-to-three rounds of fieldwork in 2015 during which in-depth interviews were undertaken with at least one adult and one youth from 24 households. Focus group discussions with adult women and men, female and male youths and locally important people of both sexes contributed important insights in Bangladesh and Ghana. Visual and participatory research activities added to and validated sensitive information in Indonesia.

Conceptual frameworks for analysing the three case studies were tailored to examine specific aspects of intra-household relations, depending on the themes emerging in the empirical material. This enabled the research teams to bring out critical insights into the ways in which gender, age, poverty, migration, and remittances intersect in each country.

What we found

Bangladesh

The study in Bangladesh challenged the common assumption that men are providers and women are care-givers, by unpacking the multiple ways in which men and women conform to and negotiate with these norms to rationalise their own positions.

Gender identification is a fluid process that reflects the different relationships women have with other household members and people elsewhere. We found that migration creates new ways of doing gender and allows women (and men) to subvert some gender norms and dwell in others. For example, when women are remittance managers they perform their duties as good wives by becoming temporary household heads who deal with things in the public arena and take decisions, which they would not have been allowed to do had the husband been present. Although they discuss decisions with their husband and seek advice from their brothers, they venture out of the secluded female spaces and male protection/surveillance, and they take responsibility for important decisions without this being considered a transgression of gender norms.

Female migrants perform their duties as good mothers; sometimes unambiguously by flouting their duties as good wives since their proactivity highlights the husband's incapacity, and sometimes by pure need because they have been abandoned by the husband, divorced or widowed and their family cannot support them. Migration is stigmatising for women because they

transgress norms related to female seclusion, honour, and protection. They must navigate carefully how they conduct themselves and how they convert remittances into other resources. Some reinforce a more traditional feminine subject position by letting their father or brother take control of the use of remittances.

Wives of migrants are afforded social legitimacy while female migrants are not, despite the fact that both categories of women engage with strangers in the public domain and make decisions. But the conduct of wives of migrants' buttresses men's breadwinning, while the comportment of female migrants highlight men's violation of their duties. Control over resources and choice do not automatically equate empowerment. However, the slow extension of the areas in which women – as wives of migrants and as migrants - can use their voice is likely to have enduring effect on gender inequalities.

Ghana

The study in Ghana exposed that norms related to male and female responsibilities can be used by those in subordinate positions to legitimise gaining control over hard-earned resources instead of transferring the rights to control their use to the patriarch.

Male migrants' choices about sending remittances are linked to the social construction of them as husbands and breadwinners. We found that unmarried men were concerned about becoming breadwinners and often curtailed the redistribution of their earnings to prepare for marriage. Married men prioritised their responsibilities towards their wives and children. In Northern Ghana, many households accommodate extended families and a marriage is considered as being between two families rather than between two individuals. In the past male elders were involved in negotiating marriages and they took charge of distributing food within the household. Nowadays junior men retain control over their earnings from migration and they favour their own social positions before sending remittances to help the older generation meet some of their responsibilities to the family.

Regardless of shifting relations among men within the household, they do not always succeed in meeting their responsibilities. Married women frequently migrate to make up for their shortcomings as providers, but they rarely take over their husband's responsibility for providing for the conjugal unit or for supporting his family. Instead they choose to remit their earnings to their parents. They justify this choice with the husband and his family's reneging of their responsibilities. Another important reason is that their own lineage offers

significant support in case of marital problems or urgent need. As a result of their contributions, migrant women experience some empowerment within their own family as they are included in decision-making processes.

Women and junior men justify and negotiate their choices about mobility and how to distribute migrant earnings by dwelling in specific norms while circumventing others. It is this subtle negotiation of norms that gradually will lead to further social change. However, women's empowerment at the bosom of their family is disconnected from their identification as wives, suggesting that the ability to benefit from migrant work and control their mobility does not necessarily contribute to gender equality within the marital home.

Indonesia

The study in Indonesia highlighted the dynamic ways that global and local politics of migration, gender, age and class intersect to enable different types of migration.

Gendered norms at the household level and in the global labour market intersect with individuals' access to migration in a myriad of ways. For example, the construction of men as breadwinners and heads of households led them to work overseas to meet their responsibilities within the family. But men's access to transnational migration depended on their ability to raise money for upfront fees, which was difficult for poorer households. Their access also shrank with age due to migration management in receiving countries privileging youthful bodies. Married women's migration was contingent on their husband's approval by law, which could have curtailed their access to migration had the global labour market not privileged female care workers. Women were able to finance their migration by entering into a debt relationship with their employer, forfeiting their wage at the beginning of the employment to repay debts. Their employability in the care sector extended over a longer period of their working lives. In relation to transnational migration gender thus represented a resource, a capital that increased women's access to overseas employment.

Despite the individualistic nature of this gendered capital, household decisions about migration were far from individual. Our findings show that they involved complex balancing of what was possible for different household members given the politics of migration, the need for money and for different types of labour within the household. Women's access to migration shrank due to reproductive concerns. It was not having children that affected their migratory pathways but the point in time when grandmothers grew too old and fragile to take care of the children.

While norms emphasising male entitlement determined decisions about migration early in a marriage, the influence of gendered capital on spouses' access to transnational migration changed the household dynamics. Having increased their participation in decision-making female migrants found it difficult to readjust to the subordinate position they had dwelled in prior to migration. Women's increasingly prominent role in enabling other household members, including their spouse, to access transnational migration increased their voice, choice and control in new ways.

Looking to the future

The reasons for, and effects of, migration are tightly knit into the social fabric of communities with high levels of migration. Even when local norms, legislation and preferences in the labour markets privilege the migration of one gender over the other, it is misplaced to describe migration as a 'male phenomenon' or as 'feminized'. Migration does not only have an enduring and transformative effect on the migrant but also on the family members left behind.

Male prerogative in decision-making declines when women manage the remittances their husband sends home, and although men expect to reoccupy their former social position upon their return women object to reverting to the same subordinate position. As migrants, women consolidate their social position through the redistribution of their

earnings. To the extent they can they help feed households, pay school fees, buy plots of land, build houses and finance the migration of others. Migration increases women's voice, choice and control in different ways but policy makers must recognise that patriarchal structures obscure a plausible causality between the three elements assumed to underpin empowerment and the achievement of gender equality.

To support the achievement of gender equality, we recommend:

1. Governments should work with civil society to find ways that create more space for women who benefit from migrant work, as migrants and as remittance managers, to participate in decision-making outside the household
2. Researchers should work with civil society to raise awareness in government and the general public about the diversity of migrant pathways experienced by women to counter stigmatisation and misconceptions about the linkages between trafficking and women's access to migration
3. Advocacy organisations working for women's rights and gender equality should be sensitised to the transformative effects of migration on gender dynamics within households to support their work addressing the drivers of inequality

Further reading

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About us

Migrating out of Poverty is a research programme consortium funded by the UK's Department for International Development. It focuses on the relationship between internal and regional migration and poverty.