

Chapter 55

Migration, Muslim Women, and Social Reproduction of Gender Inequality: International Migration and Social Remittances in Gender Relations in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Does international migration have a role to reproduce unequal gender relation in a patriarchal society? How does it make such role? How does it further implicate people's religious as well as cultural practices? These are the questions have been addressed in this paper. It takes the case of Bangladesh, a South Asian Muslim-majority country with millions of international labour migrants to different Middle East and Gulf countries including Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain. This international migration makes very positive financial contributions to the migrants and their families at origins, mostly in rural villages. The paper makes it focus on social outcomes, especially on household level gender relations with such migration. Taking up the idea of 'social remittances', it argues that these migrants, mostly men, experience with a range of 'Islamic' norms and practices in destinations, and send back those to origins for religious obligations. These norms and practices largely include discouraging female household members, especially wives, to earn or go outside without purdah in line with the perceived 'Islam'. The paper explains that such 'social remittances' encourage the female household members to be 'good' Muslim women along with the reproduction of gender inequality between women and men.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-6912-1.ch055

INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, people have gained greater access to mobility than ever, often leading to the expansion of transnational communities. The term ‘transnational communities’ comprises of migrants and their friends and families maintaining a strong chain of socio-cultural connection (Fries, 2012). The contemporary trend in the globalized world gives a sense of this expansion. According to latest data, the total number of migrants is about 247 million (KNOMAD, 2016, p.6) of which 48 percent is women (Ratha, Plaza, & Ozden, 2016, p.3). Their contributions to the global economy are noteworthy, as the amount of remittances in the current year is roughly \$601 billion in which developing countries take the share of \$441 billion (Ratha, Plaza, & Ozden, 2016, p.6). The amount of remittance compared to debt of these developing countries is three times higher than their total debt (Ratha, Plaza, & Ozden, 2016, p.6). The United States, followed by Saudi Arabia, Germany, the Russian Federation, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, France, Canada, Spain, and Australia remain the top migrant receiving countries (Ratha, Plaza, & Ozden, 2016, p.6). Despite the growing number of migrants in the global North, the South-South migration trend is on the upsurge. It stands for 38 percent of the aggregated migration and is larger in number than South-North migration which stands for 34 percent (Ratha, Plaza, & Ozden, 2016, p.6). The paper makes it focus on social outcomes, especially on household level gender relations with such migration. Taking up the idea of “social remittances”, it argues that these migrants, mostly men, experience with a range of “Islamic” norms and practices in destinations, and send back those to origins for religious obligations. These norms and practices largely include discouraging female household members, especially wives, to earn or go outside without purdah in line with the perceived “Islam”. The paper explains that such “social remittances” encourage the female household members to be “good” Muslim women along with the reproduction of gender inequality between women and men.

BACKGROUND

Bangladesh, one of the top five of migrants sending countries (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2016, p.16) and ranks tenth as recipients of remittance in this year (KNOMAD, 2016, p.29). It has shown remarkable growth as its current GDP growth rate is 7.11 percent (“GDP - Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics-Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh”, 2016) which is twice than the global GDP growth rate of 3.1 percent (International Monetary Fund, 2016, p.6). Such migration from Bangladesh constitutes the labour force in the destination countries, the very reason they are called “labour migrant” (Siddiqui, 2003). There are seven million Bangladeshi labour migrants working in more than twenty countries of which Oman is the highest recipient in the year of 2016 (“Overseas Employment in 2016”, 2016). As mentioned earlier, women accounts for 48 percent of the global migrants (Ratha, Plaza, & Ozden, 2016, p.3) whereas in Bangladesh their share in the migrant population is about 13 percent (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2016, p.29). In the current year, the amount of remittance has been about 11 billion USD (“Overseas Employment & Remittance from 1976 - 2016”, 2016). Remittance consists more than 7 percent of the country’s GDP (“Personal remittances, received (% of GDP) | Data”, 2016) and stands higher compared to the aggregate contribution of agricultural, industrial and service sector which is about 6.5 percent (Bangladesh Bank, p.4). Remittance has a significant role in country’s poverty reduction and building human capital (Hatemi-J & Uddin, 2013). A recent study by Bureau of

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