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# Multiple masculinities of labour migrants: how Bangladeshi migrant men rationalize gender norms in their home country

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**ABSTRACT**

Although there is growing scholarship on marginalized migrants and racialized masculinities, studies on how migrant masculinities influence gender norms in the origin countries remain limited. This article explores the formation of multiple masculinities among low-paid Bangladeshi labour migrants to the Middle-East and South-East Asia. I pay particular attention to how migration influences men's attitudes towards gender norms in their home country. This ethnography reveals that Bangladeshi migrant men advocate for female 'modesty' and religious schooling for women in their native communities. Struggling to achieve hegemonic masculine power abroad, men uphold rigid masculinities back home often by relying on a patriarchal interpretation of Islam. Regardless of the diverse ways in which Islam is practiced in the host countries, migrant men returning from both the Middle East and South-East Asia exhibit similarly conservative views on gender norms. This article highlights the need for further research that examines how formation of multiple masculinities among migrant men may impact gender relations in their native communities.

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## Introduction

Contemporary studies at the intersection of labour migration and gender often emphasize the experience of female migrants. Scholarship on migrant masculinities is recently emerging (Datta et al., 2009; Donaldson & Howson, 2009; Farahani, 2012; Sarti & Scrinzi, 2010) and remains scant. Within this emerging body of literature, Kukreja (2021) and Peletz (2021) highlight the importance of locating migrant masculinities for South and Southeast Asian men in the contexts of global and political economies and with reference to the narratives of otherness. Previously, Gardner and Osella (2003) had associated migration with social transformation in their study of South Asian masculinities. A few scholars have also looked at South Asian Muslim masculinities focusing on Tablighi Jamaat movement that demonstrated a gentler version of masculinity as opposed to political Islamist masculinity (Masud, 2000; Metcalf, 2000). Following this, Samuel (2011) has tried to understand whether new movements (such as ritual practices among Hijaz community in the UK) can create a new form of masculinity in South Asia and South

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Asian diasporas. In this paper, I present an ethnography of low-paid Bangladeshi migrant men who have returned (or are on leave) from their work in Middle East and South-East Asia. I explore how migration influences their views on gender norms, particularly their attitudes on women's physical mobility and education.

Social construction of Bangladeshi migrant masculinity in Italy (Della Puppa, 2019) and the life-course of Bangladeshi migrants in Portugal (Mapril, 2014) have been studied to understand the circumstances of Bangladeshi diasporas in Southern European countries. Some scholars (Kibria, 2008; Pande, 2017; Rao & Hossain, 2012; Ye, 2014) have considered the process of identity formation explicitly among Bangladeshi male labour migrants. While this literature helps understand ways in which identities of male Bangladeshi labour migrants may transform, there is a lack of research that reveals how such transformations may affect gender relations in their home country. It is of particular interest to examine how men's understanding of women's public and private roles may change through the experience of labour migration. This paper aims to address these research gaps by studying Bangladeshi migrant men's narratives on their experiences of living abroad and on their conception of female modesty and religious schooling. Through this paper, my hope is to contribute to an enhanced understanding of how migrant masculinities may impact women's everyday lives in their homeland.

The developing research on men and masculinities has suggested that on one hand, notions of masculinity shape the decision to migrate, and on the other hand, the migration process itself affects men's identity (Pande, 2017). Masculinity intersects with ethnicity, race and class, such that men's experiences of various aspects of social life can differ significantly (Charsley, 2005; Ye, 2014). However, religion as one such factor shaping the formation of masculinity and mobile masculinity has often been disregarded. Samuel (2011) emphasizes that a great deal of attention is paid to religion when studying the construction of femininity in Christian and Islamic traditions, but much less when studying the construction of masculinity. In this paper, I attempt to bring together the contexts of migration and religion to understand Bangladeshi migrant masculinities.

I examine whether and how religious practices and gender norms of host countries influence migrant men's attitudes on gender norms back home. The findings of my research are consistent with previous research on migrant masculinities such as by Elmhirst (2007), that the loss of hegemonic status in the host country further compels men to promote hegemonic masculinize in their country of origin. Validation of such hegemonic masculinities is often established with a patriarchal interpretation of Islam and women's status. Men promote female modesty and religious schooling for their daughters to regain their loss of 'manly' status abroad. On the other hand, migration does provide an avenue for men to reinforce their 'responsible' masculine identities by performing certain gendered responsibilities such as sending remittances. Therefore, I argue that migration-induced masculine identity is not simple or one-dimensional. Rather, it constructs different dimensions such as: responsible, and 'religious', which further strengthens the hegemonic masculinity.

Connell (1987) stresses that hegemonic masculinity is always constructed in relation to at least three other types masculinity. These are: (i) complicit masculinity, which is understood as men's general advantage over women; (ii) subordinate masculinity, which is the opposite of hegemonic heterosexual ideal and is connected to homosexuality and femininity; and (iii) marginalized masculinity, which represents race and class-based

variations such as Black or working-class masculinities (Connell, 1987, p. 183). In the global labour force, the least sought-after jobs are often allocated to the most marginal groups, usually sorted along gender, national and ethnic lines (McKay, 2007). Viewed within this framework, male labour migrants from Bangladesh belong to the marginalized masculinity group. However, as women themselves can reproduce gender hierarchies (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 848) and racially marginalized people can also reproduce racist hierarchies (Khalad, 2017), I argue that men from marginalized groups can also create their own versions of hegemonic masculinity.

I now turn to a brief discussion on gendered labour migration from Bangladesh.

## Bangladesh, labour migration and gender

Bangladesh is one of the major global suppliers of migrant labour. There are Bangladeshi migrant workers located in 157 countries, where the major destinations are the Middle East and Southeast Asia (Ahmed, Akond, Hossain, Bidisha, & Akter, 2015). Despite a major economic transformation in recent years (UNDP, 2016) and significant progress in primary education, health, and reduction of hunger (Etzold & Mallick, 2015; Kibria, 2011), major financial and social challenges remain in Bangladesh. Substantial issues are high levels of extreme poverty (12.9% of the total population in 2015–2016), and growing inequality and vulnerability (Lewis & Hossain, 2018). Poverty and overpopulation contribute to lack of gainful job opportunities, which serves as a catalyst for migration. Women in Bangladesh remain disadvantaged in terms of average earnings (52% lower than men's) and labour market participation (34% as opposed to 82% for men); women's low economic status is also reflected in high levels of gender-based violence (Lewis & Hossain, 2018).

In South Asia and Arab countries, where religious beliefs and cultural practices have a strong impact on the social position and movement of women, female labour migration is rarely respected (Lim & Oishi, 1996). In Bangladeshi culture, migration is not socially encouraged for women, especially those who are unmarried. Community members, particularly husbands of the migrant women, speculate that women cannot survive abroad without being sexually exploited (Bélanger & Rahman, 2013). Bangladesh's government policy and social norms equally discourage female labour migration. It is important to note, however, that these restrictions often do not apply to middle class or skilled female migrants who migrate for skilled employment and education. This dichotomy is in contrast to the favourable perception in Bangladesh of labour migration of men from all social spectra. Bangladesh has the world's highest rate of under-15 child marriage and fourth highest rate of underage marriage overall (Adams, 2015), which reflects the fact that male adult migrants are often married to young women. These men thus leave behind young brides and children, and how their migrant masculinities shape these family relationships has been sparsely studied.

## Exploitation in the host countries

Abuse and harassment of low paid workers in the Gulf countries has been well documented in both academic and non-academic works. Bangladeshi labourers are often known as *miskin* (beggars) in the Gulf and experience malicious abuse (physical torture including

kicking, hitting and throwing stones) that is often higher compared to that faced by other South Asian migrants; some even purposely disguise their Bangladesh origins by speaking only Urdu or Arabic when in public (Kibria, 2008, p. 522). Nonetheless, such abuse and manipulation of labour migrants are largely not confined to a specific nationality or gender, but rather connected to migrants' class and social status in both sending and receiving countries. Skilled or professional migrants (e.g. accountants, engineers) tend to face less experience of harassment or discrimination, which reveals the 'deeply class-inflected character of Bangladeshi stigmatization' in countries like the United Arab Emirates (Kibria, 2008, p. 528).

Challenged by such difficult working conditions at their destination, South Asian male migrants rely on their home, women's faithfulness and nurturing labour, seeking a balance in their lives and a defence against the oddities of the market (Chopra, Osella, & Osella, 2004; Sangari, 2002). Male migrants are portrayed as 'suffering and selfless men of faith', sacrificing homely comfort to sufficiently provide for their families (Gardner & Osella, 2003, p. xvii; Rao, 2012, p. 31). This invites a parallel response of sacrifice from the women for the sake of their families' welfare (Rao, 2012). Bangladeshi male labour migrants desire polite, obedient and good-looking wives who can be their confidantes; returning migrants from Saudi Arabia prefer their wives to be like Saudi women practicing veil and staying at home (Rao, 2012, p. 32). Gendered practices, however, can be strikingly different in the Gulf compared to East Asian Countries (Singapore, South Korea and Malaysia). How returning Bangladeshi male migrants from these varying destinations perceive gender roles has been unclear.

## Methods

This study is part of my doctoral research that includes participant observation and semi-structured interviews of 16 Bangladeshi men. Fieldwork was conducted in two districts of Bangladesh: Bogura and Munshiganj, in 2017. The former consists of remote villages, and the latter is suburban. Contrasting settings were chosen to analyse how the construction of masculinities and its impacts may depend on the local context.

Some of the men are returned migrants and others are on leave from Middle East and Southeast Asia. The men are between ages 20–55, and all but three were married. All men identified themselves as practicing Muslims. Eleven of the sixteen men are from the villages of Bogura district and the remaining five are from a sub-urban area of Munshiganj district. I utilized my personal and professional contacts in Bangladesh to recruit my study participants. My ability to speak Bengali fluently and my traditional Bangladeshi attire facilitated the process of connecting with my study participants. Yet, due to my urban middle-class status and a background of studying and living abroad, I was perceived as an 'outsider' rather than as an 'insider'. The men were generally confident and joyous when they shared their experience of learning the culture of their host countries. However, there were challenging moments when many of the men shared conservative views on women's public and private roles as I tried to explore how migration has impacted their views on gender norms.

To explore changes in men's attitudes towards gender norms, I tried to investigate the gendered division of labour in the migrant households. Previous research on Mexican migrant men suggests that migrants continue cooking and cleaning (skills they learned

during their stay abroad without families) after they return to their home country (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992). One difficult moment was when I attempted to ask my participants whether they were still engaged in housekeeping activities after their return to home country. In the study villages and in general, many Bangladeshi married men are not typically involved in housework such as cooking and cleaning. I had to be conscious of not asking overly direct questions about gendered divisions of labour that could be interpreted as disrespect toward the local culture. It could also, signpost a tendency to project 'other' customs (e.g. men helping in kitchen) as a superior culture. As May (2004) argued, reflexive research practice entails an understanding of the social (local) conditions of social scientific knowledge production. I therefore asked my participants indirect questions related to their daily routine. Also, participant observation enabled me to record some data without asking direct questions.

I conducted thematic analysis of the interviews using a grounded theory approach. I focused on the parts of interviews where the men shared their views on female 'modesty', their expectations towards their wives and daughters, and the occasions when the migrant men were able to observe gender relations in their host countries. I refined my codes to analyse migration-induced multiple masculinities from the experiences shared by them.

## Preferences for Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia appeared as most common and favoured destination for migration. Seven men migrated to Saudi Arabia (five men from the villages and two sub-urban men) whereas, UAE, Singapore and Malaysia were next most popular destinations. Men from the villages clarified that for migrating to the Middle Eastern countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, a minimum level of education is not required. Visa processes for migration to Saudi Arabia are completed by brokers (often through the use of fake documents). On the other hand, a high school degree is the minimum requirement for migrating to countries like Singapore, and the process is completed through official or legal channels. This was mentioned as a key reason why the majority of men from the villages without educational certificates choose the Middle Eastern countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, as their destination. The social class of the interviewees should also be taken into consideration here. Socially disadvantaged people from Bangladesh migrate to Middle Eastern countries because these destinations are more affordable than European or other Western destinations (Figure 1).

In addition, men from the villages articulated their strong religious preference for migrating to Saudi Arabia. Migrant men in general spoke highly of Saudi Arabia as a destination country. 32-year-old Imdadul[1] mentioned that his parents sent him to Saudi Arabia because it is the home of Allah and Prophets. He believed that Arabs are the *dekha Muslims* (real Muslims), who have seen Allah and Prophets with their own eyes, whereas Bengalis are *shuna Muslims* who became Muslims after hearing about Islam from other Islamic preachers.

44-year-old Sikandar mentioned that he favoured Saudi Arabia over other countries for a different reason. He said:

> First of all, Saudi Arabia is better because it is the country of the Prophet. But it is also very good for daily physical movement. It is because in other countries women freely move

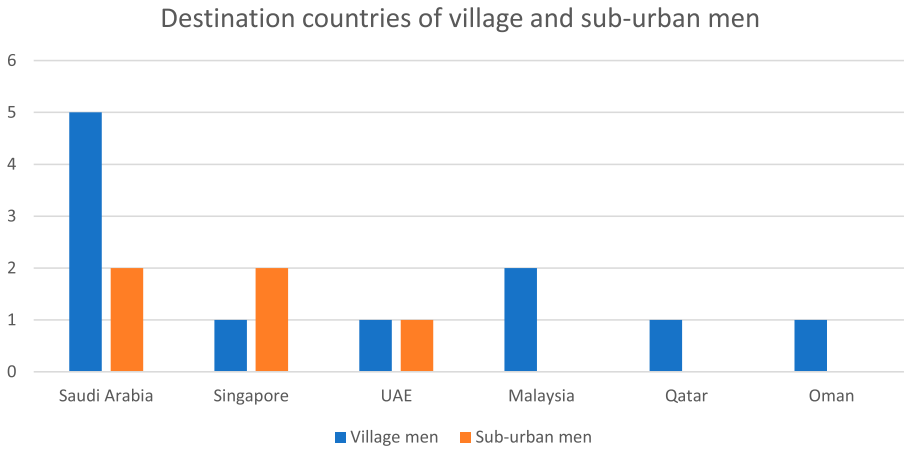


**Figure 1.** Destination countries of the study participants.

> around. See, men do not have chance to talk to women in Saudi Arabia. That is why it is really good. In Malaysia women roam around openly. In Saudi Arabia, one cannot get to experience such things.

According to Sikandar, it is difficult for men to be sexually provoked in Saudi Arabia because there are strict restrictions on women's physical mobility. He believed men can maintain their 'good character' in Saudi Arabia for that reason. This 'good character' also entails being a proper family man who is not wasted in alcohol and women; in Saudi Arabia, he believed one cannot indulge in such 'bad habits'. A previous study of Bangladeshi migrant men in the Netherlands found that they negotiate their marginalized masculinity by stressing their own good manners, family dedication, and breadwinner role as areas in which they perceive themselves to do better than white Dutch men and other migrant men (Khalad, 2017). In a similar fashion, men in my study appeared to rationalize their choice of migrating to Saudi Arabia by primarily emphasizing their adherence to religion rather than their lower educational status or the greater ease of entering the country. Their encouragement of religious schooling and female 'modesty' is discussed next.

## Men's advocacy of female 'modesty' and *madrassa* (religious schooling)

*Madrassas* are Islamic religious schools that are the educational system of choice for a significant number of people in South Asia including Bangladesh, and other Muslim communities around the world. A discussion of the diversity and dynamism of the madrassa system is beyond the scope of this paper. However, what is relevant to note is that Bangladesh has two kinds of *madrassas*: Alia, which are supervised by the Bangladesh Madrassa Education Board, and Qawmi, which are unregistered and constitute a 'nonformal' stream of religious education in the country (Park & Niyozov, 2008). In 2017, the Bangladeshi government nevertheless started recognizing the Dawra degree of Qawmi *madrassas* as equivalent to a master's degree, a move that raised many eyebrows (Staff Correspondent, 2017). In 2018, the recognition of an unregistered Qawmi *madrassa*'s Dawra degree was confirmed by the state (Roy, Huq, & Rob, 2020). In the

study villages of Bogura, there are a few *maktabs* (elementary *madrassas*) and a formal boarding *madrassa* on the outskirts. However, it was difficult to ascertain the actual number and variations of *madrassas* in sub-urban Munshiganj, when data was collected for this research in 2017.

The returned migrant men in the villages mentioned they prefer sending their daughters to *madrassas* and getting them married at an early age. The men believed that by performing such acts for the daughters, parents can earn *swaab* (rewards in afterlife). A widespread belief among my participants from the villages was, if a man raises a 'modest' daughter, heaven is guaranteed for him after death. 'Modest' daughter in this context is someone who wears *burkha* or *hijab*, does not hang out with boys and does not have romantic affairs before marriage. One such example was 45-year-old Mostak. Mostak was a returnee from Saudi Arabia where he used to work as a shop assistant. In his word:

> See, I care for my son and daughter a lot. Our religion is Islam. It requires women to maintain *purdah*.[2] That is why I send my daughter to female *madrassa*. If I had sent her to a non-Islamic (Bengali medium) school where boys also study, this would be a sin. But if she stays in religious school and maintains her modest character, Allah[3] will forgive any sins had I ever committed!

A lot of the migrant men (both the returnees and those who are on leave) seemed to carry similar views. Returned from Saudi Arabia, 32-year-old Imdadul believed the honour of a girl is in marriage and in receiving *madrassa* education. He further stated that educated people from town can rightfully disagree, but as a villager he is proud of his belief. In Imdadul's words:

> We are uneducated village people. We believe it is better that our girls leave their natal home (through marriage) even when they are not adult. This is a village custom. You educated people do not have to agree with us.

For rural men and women in Bangladesh (Ahmed, 2008) and for people in poverty around the world (Narayan, Chambers, Shah, & Petesch, 2000), being able to walk with dignity is as important as financial security. Raising a 'modest' daughter and sending children to *madrassa* were spiritual goals of the migrant men I interviewed for this research. Female 'modesty' was seen as a key indicator for their dignity.

Rao and Hossain (2012) observe that *madrassa* is popular in rural Bangladesh because Quranic learning in Arabic is understood to increase familiarity with the language, enabling boys to migrate to the Gulf. However, my interviewees tended to disagree with such claims. They explained that they send their children (both male and female) to *madrassa* primarily for religious purposes and not for worldly rewards or benefits. I questioned 28-year-old Enamul, a returnee from Oman, if learning Arabic for migration is the reason behind sending boys to *madrassa*. He replied:

> No. If you say so, then we are thinking about life in this world. The main reason behind sending them to *madrassa*, is to make our boys religious. *Alem banabo*. Do you think I will send my child to the Gulf for a difficult life? No. My children will stay in this country.

The statement above summarizes the sentiments of men from the villages, who preferred sending their sons and daughters to *madrassa* for religious reasons. In contrast, almost all the migrant men from sub-urban Munshiganj endorsed female education in Bengali

medium schools. Sub-urban men, similar to their village counterparts, did show a reluctance to question the *madrassa* system and indicated support for *madrassa* as part of a religious lifestyle. Two sub-urban return migrants, 54-year-old Jabbar and 44-year-old Mozammel explained:

> Of course, we want our daughters to be educated. People who go abroad, even if they are uneducated, they want their children to be fully educated. We understand very well how important education is. Girls are eager to study, boys are not.

This statement is strikingly different from the view expressed by the village man Imadadul (32), who said that for uneducated village people, a daughter's marriage is more important than her education. While marriage is equally important for sub-urban families, their emphasis on female education is noteworthy.

## Do host countries influence migrant men's attitudes towards gender norms?

Gender ideologies may be reconfigured across transnational spaces, as people exercise agency with new information and experiences (Mahler & Pessar, 2001). When migrants visit or return to their home countries, they often bring back newly acquired norms, which may spread across their communities (Boyd, 1989; Datta & Mishra, 2011; Tuccio & Wahba, 2018). Studies have shown that men's migration to certain countries (e.g. Saudi Arabia) can have the effect of reinforcing conservative social values in their home country (Ferrant & Tuccio, 2015; Tuccio & Wahba, 2018). Previous literature has also claimed that Bangladeshi men's migration to the Middle-East promotes *madrassa* education and *Burkha* for women in Bangladesh (Debnath & Selim, 2009; Hussain, 2010; Rao & Hossain, 2012; Siddiqi, 2006). In light of this evidence, one may wonder whether migration to countries with less rigid religious norms such as Malaysia and Singapore may encourage returning men to challenge the existing conservative norms of their home countries.

In my study, however, differences in destinations did not appear to significantly mediate the views of migrant men towards women's role in society. Men from the villages who migrated to Malaysia tended to have similar attitudes toward female 'modesty' and *madrassa* as those who migrated to Saudi Arabia. For example, a 32-year-old returnee from Malaysia, unmarried man Raihan from the village, mentioned:

> *Madrassa* is better. There is no *purdah* in Bengali medium. For future wife, I would prefer someone who studied in Arabic line (*madrassa*). But she must have some general knowledge so she can teach children. Everyone has to maintain their own culture. If we follow our Islamic culture, then women should stay inside the house. If she maintains *purdah,* she can have education then!

36-year-old Uzzal, who was on leave from Malaysia claimed:

> For women, Bangladesh is much better than Malaysia. Bangladeshi women have 'good character'. Women have too much freedom in Malaysia. They can do whatever they want, there!

These statements above echo Samuel's (2011, p. 315) findings that Bangladeshi men both in the UK and in Bangladesh can reject both traditional Bangladeshi and Western values, instead embracing Islamic positions which they perceive as divine and morally superior.

Similarly, the majority of migrant men (both from the villages and the sub-urban area) defended *madrassa* education and religious reasons for son preference, regardless of where they had migrated. Migrant men from the villages articulated their 'religious' belief that only a son is capable of performing funeral rituals for his dead father; a daughter is not allowed to perform such 'holy' acts. A similar view exists in India where according to Hindu tradition, only a son may light a man's funeral pyre (Almond, Edlund, & Milligan, 2013) and in China and South Korea, where some believe that they will be 'hungry ghosts' in the afterlife unless sons provide the necessary rituals (Das Gupta et al., 2003). The above accounts suggest that any exposure to new social norms or gender ideologies in host countries may do little to change migrant men's entrenched beliefs on gender and 'religious' roles. This unopposed prevalence of traditional village norms in the context of migration regardless of differences in destinations, reveals that it is not migration to just conventional religious countries (such as Saudi Arabia) that may encourage migrants to possess more conservative gendered and religious norms.

## Abusive or alternative masculinities?

20-year-old Atiqur, on leave from Qatar, particularly appreciated the mandatory practice of wearing *burkha* for Qatari women. He advocated for similar *burkha* rules in Bangladesh and expressed his frustration at the difficulty of implementing them in practice, since Bangladesh has a minority Hindu population. Men like Atiqur, Raihan and Uzzal who use Islam to justify restrictions on women's physical mobility can be understood as advocates of patriarchal interpretation of Islam, as Ahmed (2014) has elaborated. Patriarchal Islamicists contend that in Islam, peace in the household is contingent on women staying at home (Ahmed, 2014). In present day Bangladesh, men often perceive NGOs' efforts to elevate women's status in society and to increase female educational attainment as a threat to their space in the rural community (Ahmed, 2008). Cleaver (2002) observes that social, economic and political development, which has gender equality at its core, threatens the established masculine identity. Ahmed (2008) claims that abusive masculinity in Bangladesh therefore uses Islam as a last resort in desperation. In my study, there is evidence of such masculinities among the migrant men, regardless of how Islam is practised in their host communities. The men in this study were comfortable making references to Islam in order to justify women's domestic roles.

However, scholarships focused on Bangladeshi migrant masculinities incline to differ. There is a call for reviewing migration-induced masculinity, alternative to educated masculinity for rural men. For instance, Rao and Hossain (2012) state that men represent themselves as more successful than they probably are, hiding the drudgery, exploitation and exhaustion; they present themselves as well-informed and skilful. The sense of degradation felt at the work environment is compensated through a carefully constructed positive self-identity at home and a strategic representation of their manly ability to survive (Rao & Hossain, 2012). It is maintained by re-creation of a discourse of femininity revolving around the home and reproduction rather than the workplace (Rao & Hossain, 2012). Chopra et al. (2004) claim that South Asian masculinities are constituted in relation to others: their wives and children, wider kin, and whole neighbourhoods with stances shaped to build both dignity and economic security. But this occurs in

other parts of the world too, where different versions of masculinity can be related to each other in any particular setting (Herzfeld, 1985). This relational dimension of masculinity is particularly emphasized in South Asia, to the detriment of an individualistic masculinity that is often more typical of other parts of the world (see Herzfeld, 1985).

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p. 844) claim that the hegemonic impression of maleness is also linked to femininity. Women's practices and beliefs, which are shaped by patriarchal norms, also reproduce the ideal norms of what can be called as men's work and what can be called as women's work (Khalad, 2017). As discussed earlier in the paper, labour migrants navigate an unfriendly environment abroad by relying on their home and women's faithfulness (Chopra et al., 2004; Kibria, 2008; Sangari, 2002). The same is true for my study participants when they strongly insist that women are best as homemakers.

The men I interviewed proudly shared their experience of living and working abroad, and rarely mentioned the ill treatment they received in their host countries. An exception was 30-year-old Saeed, who acknowledged that Bangladeshi men like him are treated like beggars in Dubai. And 32-year-old Delwar complained how he was never invited by his shop owner for a cup of tea but could be called upon to clean his owner's house.

## Responsible, 'religious' and hegemonic masculinity

Upon return, a migrant often invests his earnings in purchasing a new house or land, once the debts he owes (for migration-related costs) are paid off. But another significant area of expenditure is an unmarried sister's marriage. Many returned migrants in the villages used the phrase '*bonok bia disi*' which translates to 'I got my sister married'. Even in marriages without the customary dowry,[4] there are expenses such as shopping, decoration of the house, and wedding feasts. The migrant men in my study took pride in financing such arrangements, as though they were able to assume a responsible masculine identity. In many Bangladeshi families across social classes, it is common for a brother to get married or to settle down after his sister has done the same.[5]

As per the prevailing patrilocal residential pattern in the study villages, it was common for women to reside with their in-laws. Elsewhere, I have explained that left behind wives' everyday activities in these villages are supervised by the in-laws who receive and control the remittances sent by the migrant men (Kamal, 2022). This may lead to a dialog here about the power relation between the in-laws and the wives, and the possible lack of power of the husbands regarding the construction of hegemonic masculinity. It is worth clarifying that in this context, migrant men do not view their parents' (particularly their mother's) exercise of power over their wives as a lack of power for the men. In fact, the migrants defend their hegemonic masculinity by sustaining the norms of patrilocal residency. Challenging patrilocality is considered effeminate in rural Bangladesh (Ahmed, 2008). Men living close to in-laws or with in-laws are the subject of undesirable stereotypes, due to its connotations of being like the conventional daughter-in-law (Charsley, 2005; Das Gupta et al., 2003). On the other hand, left-behind women in the sub-urban setting stay separately from their in-laws (often close to their natal homes) and directly receive remittances sent by the husbands. Sub-urban migrant men are thus flexible, and prepared to negotiate their hegemonic masculine identities.

The formation of masculine identity in the milieu of labour migration can be complex. Inequality in rural Bangladesh translates into daily embarrassment and disrespect for lower social classes (Ahmed, 2008). Being exploited both at home and abroad, migrant men can adhere even more strongly to traditional and 'religious' customs upon their return. Migrant men from the study villages were devout and expressed their gratitude to Allah for their hard-earned money and new wealth obtained from their migration. Young migrant men used Islam to justify women's role at home, even when the men themselves did not follow the strict Islamic rules that are applied to Muslim men. For example, according to Islamic values, both Muslim men and women are encouraged to use coverings (women by adopting *hijab* and men by adopting a beard), both as a form of protection and modesty, and also a clear sign that they are followers of Islam (Roald, 2003). Several returned migrant men from both the sub-urban area and the villages were seen without beard or proper Islamic clothing. On the other hand, they strongly claimed that their wives and daughters should maintain *purdah* by practicing *burkha*. Generally, most Bengali Muslim men tend to grow beard from their mid- or late 40s, whereas women are encouraged to cover themselves with *hijab* and *burkha* from the time of their puberty. The migrant men in this study also reinforced patriarchal norms to restrict women's mobility often by manipulating the practises of Islam.

Connell (1998, p. 5) outlines hegemonic masculinity as a form of concepts and practices that are thought to be ideal for men. Understanding this idea of hegemonic masculinity through an intersectional approach is central to studies on migrant masculinity. Khalad (2017, p. 12) explains migrant men may have very limited possibilities to exert any kind of dominance towards women or men of the host society, even when they hold power over women in their own family or community. Therefore, I argue that when men cannot exercise such power in host countries, then they cannot manage to lose their existing status over women in their homeland. The exploitation of their impoverished status (both at home and abroad) and the loss of hegemonic masculine power in the destination countries further encourage migrant men to reinforce patriarchal norms upon their return, often through the patriarchal interpretation of Islam.

## Conclusion

Walter, Bourgois, and Loinaz (2004) suggest that in strongly patriarchal cultures, such as that associated with Mexican migrants in California, masculinity is produced through the practices and representations of male providers. In South Asia, this representation of idealized masculinity marks the transition from a dependent child to a responsible adult (Osella & Osella, 2000). Migration serves as a crucial and almost inevitable part of a male's transition from boy to man in South Asia including Bangladesh, India and Nepal (Osella & Osella, 2000; Sharma, 2008; Valentin, 2012). But the exploitation they face abroad makes men vulnerable and challenges their preconceptions of masculinities. As Elmhirst (2007) explains, jobless and out of place migrants must rework their masculinities to make sense of the insecurity and public embarrassment that make them feel their identities as men are under assault. Moreover, their employment in feminized labour such as cleaning and cooking abroad challenges their masculine identity. This is why upon return, men often glorify their pleasant and 'macho' experiences abroad

and hide their maltreatment or the feminized nature of their work. Furthermore, these men do not want to experience any additional cognitive dissonance so they insist on maintaining the village norms in gender relations.

A large body of literature has explained that when men feel threatened by the loss of their masculine identities, they use numerous tactics to retain a powerful status. For example, men's failure as providers in East Africa is associated with aggressive sexual behaviour, which is a tool for acquiring self-esteem and asserting domination over women, both of which are discursively constructed as legitimate ways of manifesting masculinity (Silberschmidt, 2001). For *Jat* men in urban villages of India, alcohol, drugs, gambling, eve-teasing, wife-beating and honour killings are all perceived as avenues to recover hegemonic masculinity which is at risk when men lose ownership of their lands (Govinda, 2013). Indeed, in Bangladesh too, a 30-year-old migrant worker who returned from the UAE cut off his wife's fingers when she enrolled herself at a college against his will (Ethirajan, 2011). Although such violence may not be widespread in Bangladesh, it indeed highlights a strong relationship between labour migration and abusive struggle for masculinity. I claimed that migrant men feel a loss of hegemonic power over women in destination countries, and thus aim to maintain the powerful status they have over women in their households back in Bangladesh. The attempt to control their women's freedoms and mobility by enforcing the *purdah* or 'modesty' is one manifestation of male migrants' effort to exert hegemonic masculinity.

In this paper, I focused on Bangladeshi migrant men's experience abroad and how such experiences shape their attitudes towards gender norms back home. Contrary to some previous studies, my research shows that differences in destination countries do not significantly impact men's views toward gender norms. Returnees from both Saudi Arabia and Malaysia hold similar views on female 'modesty' and 'religious' practices. Labour migration constructs multiple masculinities for men, allowing them to perform as 'religious' and responsible men who maintain their hegemonic masculinity.

## Notes

1. All names of the research participants are pseudonyms.
2. *Purdah* is the practice in certain Muslim and Hindu communities of screening women from men and strangers especially by means of a curtain. In the context of this paper, women who practice *purdah* are women who wear *burkha* and do not talk to men outside of family or community.
3. Allah is the Arabic word for God in Islam.
4. Dowry is property or money brought by a bride to her husband on their marriage.
5. In many Bangladeshi communities a girl's settled status refers to her successful marriage.

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## Notes on contributor

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