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# **Paradox of change in women's capabilities: case of two villages in Bangladesh**

Lopita Huq

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BRAC Institute of Governance and Development  
BRAC University

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By

Lopita Huq

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## Abstract

This paper seeks to understand why women's capabilities and outcomes significantly vary in two apparently similar contexts characterized by prosperity, international migration and religiosity. By analyzing the data from two purposively selected villages of Sylhet and Chittagong, it attempts to understand the factors that drive or resist changes in social behavior. This paper finds that both physical and ideational connectivity and interaction with institutions can play a big role. It further points to a need to examine the norms and values such as patriarchal control, social cohesion and religiosity that reflect the wider context and shape women's agency and outcomes.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

MFI	Microfinance Institutions
NGO	Non-government Organizations
RRA	Rapid Rural Appraisal

## 1. Introduction

In the past two decades Bangladesh has achieved remarkable progress in gender equality in terms of key social development indicators such as infant and child mortality, maternal mortality, immunization rates, contraceptive use, etc. There has been a closing of the gender gap in child mortality rates and in primary and secondary school enrolment (Mahmud 2008). Legislations prohibiting dowry, criminalizing violence against women, etc have improved the environment within which more gains can be aspired for. These improvements are attributed to government-led programmes as well as to broad-based microfinance institutions (MFI) and development non-government organizations (NGO) interventions (Mahmud 2008; Kabeer et al. 2013).

However gender outcomes are not uniform across the country – they vary spatially and they do not always move in tandem in the same direction. Some indicators are slow to change and some have proved to be resistant to change, such as age at marriage, dowry, etc. Where there has been remarkable progress, for instance in education, concomitant changes have not taken place in terms of increased female participation in formal employment. On the other hand, in areas where the level of education is low such as in the north-west of Bangladesh, there appears to be a high rate of female labour force participation (NIPORT 2016). Women in similar contexts appear to have different outcomes because of different agency or similar women with similar agency may end up having different outcomes in two different contexts.

There is evidence to show that while there is significant spatial variation in terms of socio-economic progress. Sylhet and Chittagong in particular diverge from national patterns and appear to be laggards in terms of indicators of women's development (NIPORT 2016). In this paper I examine two villages of Sylhet and Chittagong districts in rural Bangladesh with similar broad characteristics of prosperity, religiosity and international migration but with very different outcomes for women. These village studies form part of a larger research on the wider social impact of microfinance on gender norms and behavior in Bangladesh conducted in 2011, which combined a community survey, a national household survey and five village studies. The central question that this paper addresses is why women's capabilities and outcomes are so different in two apparently similar contexts. I approach the conundrum through a deeper assessment of the wider context to allow a more thorough investigation into not only the structures but also the norms and values that reflect it and drive social behaviour. This paper compares and contrasts the particular configurations of geographical, socio-cultural, institutional and economic circumstances within which women live their everyday lives. In this process particular local level dissimilarities emerge between them which can be used to explain the differences in women's outcomes and capabilities studied in terms of marriage, family planning and son preference, intra-household decision making, mobility and isolation, and work and economic agency. This paper concludes that connectivity, both ideational and physical, and access to institutions are key factors that matter on the ground for change to take place. It further indicates the need to re-examine assumed relationships between gender outcomes and community characteristics such as patriarchal control, social cohesion, religiosity in the ways that they interact and generate norms and values which may expand or restrict women's choices and agency.



## 2. Background

Bangladesh has undoubtedly made enormous strides in areas like economic growth, reduction of poverty, improvements in the trends of human development, life expectancy and others. Bangladesh's GDP has more than doubled since 1975 (Mahmud 2008). Poverty has declined at an average of 1.0 percentage point and currently stands at less than 25% in 2014 according to the Planning Commission estimates (GoB 2014). At the same time, Bangladesh has outpaced its GDP growth in terms of key social development indicators (Mahmud 2008). There has been a closing of the gender gap in primary and secondary school enrolment and in child mortality rates. Bangladesh is also close to achieving universal immunization against measles. There has been a rapid growth in the 1990s in women's labour force participation from 8 percent in 1983-84 to 18 percent in 1995-1996 (Mahmud 2008) and a steady increase since then from 23.9 in 1999-2000 to 33.5 in 2013 (BBS LFS 1999-2000 and 2013). In the Global Gender Gap Index calculated by educational attainment, health and survival, economic participation and political empowerment from the World Economic Forum, Bangladesh ranked 68 out of 142 countries in 2014, leaving behind India, Pakistan and Nepal (GoB 2014).

Bangladesh belongs in the regional belt of 'classic' patriarchy (Kandiyoti 1988). Here we have a patrilineal and patriarchal kinship system, where women get married outside their natal village, where men are the primary breadwinners and marriage is the most important institution. Characteristically, norms around women's purdah, seclusion and mobility are strong, with strong control over women's reproductive role generally resulting in high fertility outcomes and son preference. It is the fact that Bangladesh has achieved such social transformation over the past few decades despite such discriminatory and patriarchal social norms and values that is truly remarkable.

The 7th Five Year Plan recognizes that social norms and beliefs are key to shaping behavior, rules, policies and actions at the individual, community and national levels (GoB 2014). Changes in socio-economic indicators ultimately mean changes in peoples' beliefs, attitudes and dispositions that drive changes in their behaviour. It is in the choices people make given the resources that they have at hand. It sometimes means going against the norms or manipulating or maneuvering around norms or even reinventing norms and valued ways of being. Policies and programmes just do not happen to them, that is, they are not just recipients; they exercise their agency in choosing their path. However, attempts to understand changes by looking at individual socio-economic indicators may not be successful because these indicators change not in a vacuum or in a linear fashion but in interaction with each other - negating, supporting or reinforcing each other to change incentives for household decision-making as well as in attitudes and behaviours (Mahmud 2008).

A further dimension of the transitions is the fact that there is 'striking and persistent variation' in social indicators across regions in Bangladesh (Faguet and Ali 2009). Labour force participation rate in some districts, like Pirojpur, Chandpur, Noakhali and Laxmipur and Faridpur were less than 25% compared to national average of 36% in 2010. Literacy rate in Bandarban, Cox's Bazar, Sunamganj, Netrokona, Jamalpur were between 35-40% compared to the national average of 58% (GoB 2014). Variations across locations are usually studied in terms of single social development indicators, such as maternal and child health outcomes (Ali 2010), contraceptive use (Amin, Basu

and Stephenson 2002), domestic violence (Koenig et al 2003), etc. Many studies use location or regional dummies to stand in for cultural context when studying a particular phenomenon over space. But while correlations are found between different indicators and the dummy variable, the latter often remains unspecified, a shorthand compressing a whole range of information of interconnected norms and practices (Kabeer 1999). Several studies have demonstrated that social forces such as religious practice and history along with geography have much to do with contemporary courses of transitions in social development factors such as accessing health services, fertility decline, etc (Faguet and Ali 2009; Amin, Basu and Stephenson 2002). This research paper is an attempt to go beyond broad regional characterizations of Sylhet and Chittagong districts with apparently similar characteristics to conduct community level analysis of two village contexts to bring out the differences between them and use them to explain differences in women's capabilities and outcomes.

In the following pages, I have discussed data and methods in Section 3. Section 4 describes the setting of the two villages. Section 5a and 5b consist of the findings of the research in terms of the normative context and women's lives in the two villages respectively. The discussion of the findings is in Section 6. Section 7 draws the conclusion to this paper.

### 3. Data and Methods

In this paper I hypothesize that differences in women's capabilities and gender outcomes across two locations with broadly similar regional characteristics of high international migration, religiosity and prosperity is related to the specific configurations of the geographical, socio-cultural and economic context of the community. In particular, I hypothesize that both physical and ideational connectivity play an important role in enabling women to bring transformative changes into their lives. I set out to answer the following questions:

- What is the nature of the community in the two villages
- How do contextual characteristics influence choice?
- To what extent are women able to exercise their choice in the two villages?

This research was carried out as part of a larger research on the wider social impact of microfinance on gender norms and behavior carried out in 2011. The purpose of the research was to understand how credit programme influences diffuse through the communities being mediated by the context. The research entailed a quantitative nationally representative household survey in 300 PSUs (primary sampling units), a community survey of the rural PSUs and five qualitative village studies.

On the basis of the community survey data, five villages were selected for the qualitative research to study the nature of micro credit institutions in the community, how they operate in such a context and how its influences are mediated by the particular context of the community. Each village represented a particular contextual characteristic of interest to us, for instance physical vulnerability, violence, religiosity, international migration etc.

This paper is based on the findings from two of the five villages that were studied, Village K in Chittagong district and Village M in Sylhet district. In the larger research, Village K was selected for its high religiosity score based on the following indicators: number of men's religious associations for men, women's religious association in village, number of *waz mehfils*<sup>1</sup> in past year, number of mosques in the village, *boys' kowmi* madrasa in the village, whether all or most girls/women wear *burkha* when going outside the house. Village M was selected for high international migration, selected on the basis of proportion of male international migrants in the communities and destination countries. These two villages were purposively selected for this paper as both villages are part of the former Chittagong division and are widely known to share characteristics of prosperity, religious conservatism and international migration.

Research in these two villages were carried out over a period of 7 days in each village using mainly rapid rural appraisal (RRA) tools: transect walk, social mapping, institutional mapping, key informant interviews and in-depth case studies using life history method of 8 women in each village.

In the following sections I have first described the setting of the two villages in terms of geographical location, economy, population, presence and access to institutions and visibility of women. I have used the following indicators to study the findings on the normative context and women's lives in the two villages:

- The normative context: social cohesion, religiosity or religious control, family structures and norms around marriage, purdah and work.
- Women's lives in the two villages: marriage, family planning and son preference, intra-household decision making, mobility and isolation, and work and economic agency.

In my analysis I broadly use the understanding derived from Sen's concept of capabilities, that is, "the potential that people have for living the lives they want, of achieving valued ways of 'being and doing'" (cited in Kabeer 1999:438). Capabilities involve both resources and agency, where resources include material, social and human resources that enhance the ability to make choices. In simple terms agency is the capacity to choose and to act on choice. Though mainly seen in terms of decision-making, agency can "take the form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis" (Kabeer 1999: 438). Outcomes are the achievements derived from the process of exercising agency.

#### *Brief socio-cultural and demographic profile of Sylhet and Chittagong divisions*

Prior to 1995, the Chittagong and Sylhet divisions covering the entire Eastern side of Bangladesh were one division, Chittagong. This entire belt has been known for its religious conservatism as well as for its high rate of international migration which sets these areas aside from other regions of Bangladesh. The landscape of both Chittagong and Sylhet is dotted with shrines or *mazaars* of various pirs. Pirs are people socially recognized as having spiritual powers and who act as an intermediary between people and God and to whom therefore people offer gifts to deliver their prayers to God. Sylhet is particularly well-known as the home of the pir

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<sup>1</sup> Congregations where religious leaders sermonize

Shah Jalal generally known to have introduced Islam to Sylhet, and the 360 disciples who came with him and who have acquired pir status (Gardner 1998). People of both Sylhet and Chittagong have long histories of international migration being reputed as lascars or sailors. The migration story of Sylheties is particularly tied to the British when in the 19th century they boarded British ships carrying goods from Calcutta to elsewhere in the world (Gardner 2009). United Kingdom remains to this day the prime destination for international migration although now it has spread much further to the Middle East, Europe and the USA. As an important port city, Chittagong reports the arrival of Arab traders at the port as early as 9th century A.D. Migration is highest to the various countries of the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia, Oman, Dubai, Qatar and Bahrain (Siddiqui 2003). Remittance from international migration has made both Sylhet and Chittagong prosperous areas.

However, it is interesting to note that in most comparative studies and as demonstrated in the Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey 2014 data (see Annex Table 1), Chittagong and Sylhet divisions fare poorly in most of the demographic, social and attitudinal outcomes in relation to the five other divisions of Bangladesh (NIPORT 2014). According to the BDHS 2014 data, Sylhet division has the highest proportion of ever married 15-49 year old women (32%) with no education, with Chittagong division faring much better (22%), second only to Barisal division. Chittagong is also ahead of Sylhet in terms of median years of schooling for women (6.8 years compared to 3.9 years). Median age at marriage for women between ages 20-49 years was highest for these two divisions. On the other hand, the lowest proportions of women in Chittagong and Sylhet (26% and 18% respectively) are currently employed. Two thirds of the women in Sylhet do not access any form of media at least once a week; the same can be said for 44% of women in Chittagong.

Sylhet division also has the highest total fertility rate (2.9) followed by Chittagong division (2.5). Accordingly ideal family sizes are also the highest in these two divisions (2.5 in Sylhet; 2.4 in Chittagong). Sylhet and Chittagong also represent the two lowest proportions of women currently married between 15-49 years who use any kind of family planning method. Among those who have had a live birth in the last three years, Sylhet represents the lowest proportion of women to have received any kind of antenatal care and the highest proportion of women who delivered at home. Relatively lower proportions of women in Sylhet and Chittagong reported they go to the health center alone or with children (64.3 and 68 percent respectively). Nearly a quarter of the currently married of 15-49 year old women in Sylhet said they could not take any of the following four decisions by themselves or jointly with their husbands regarding: 1) Woman's own healthcare; 2) Making major household purchases; 3) Child health care; 4) Visits to her family or relatives. Women in Chittagong fared better with 17.4% of the women reporting the same. The data on agreeing that a husband is justified to hit or beat his wife for arguing with the husband and going out without telling him was more mixed. About 25% women in Sylhet and 22% of women in Chittagong agreed with the former (national rural average is 21.1%) while the proportions for agreeing with the latter were 16% and 14% respectively (national rural average is 15.3%).

It is noteworthy that women from the northern division of Rangpur and northwestern division of Rajshahi fared better in nearly all of the employment, fertility, and women's empowerment indicators used in the BDHS data although they were the least educated and were married off at the earliest ages.

## 4. The setting

This section describes the relevant findings on community characteristics and type and nature of formal and social institutions to provide the general setting within which the women's lives are situated. The particular characteristics described are: geographical location, economy, population, presence and access to institutions and visibility of women.

### 4a. Village M, Sylhet

Village M is a small village, remote not only in terms of its distance from the sub district and district towns, but also in terms of lack of direct transportation to these towns. Located across the river Kushiara, people have to take a 25 minute boat ride and then a bus to travel 15km to the nearest town and 30km to Sylhet city.

The economy is prosperous, driven mainly by remittance from international migration with nearly every family having male members working abroad – in Europe and the Middle East, and more recently in the USA and Canada. Agriculture is another mainstay of the economy and most families own large expanses of land surrounding the village. According to the community people, they do not cultivate their entire land and harvest one crop of rice a year because of the tremendous increase in price of agricultural inputs, high wage rates and transportation costs<sup>2</sup>. Generally, the locals never do agricultural work themselves. Wage labourers are hired from neighbouring villages known by the locals as “*notun basti*” (new slum) where migrants from other parts of the country settled to make use of the abundant natural resources in Sylhet.

The population is homogenous, being mainly local (few internal migrants) and Muslim (with few Hindu families who are doctors and teachers). According to the community people, a majority of the families have multiple members who are international migrants and are also large landowners. Their prosperity is manifested in the ornate and elaborate construction and design of the houses. Middle income families are those who are international migrants and are prosperous, but who own little or no land. People, who informants claim are poor, are those who failed in their ventures abroad and returned with little resources, or those who have no international migrant family members. There are poorer families who do not own any land and work as sharecroppers but only a handful of such families could be found in Village M.

Poor communication was identified as one of the main problems affecting trade and business. Transportation costs are so high that it is more economic to consume agricultural products than to sell them. Poor communication severely hampers their access to services, particularly good health services for which they have to travel to Sylhet city. Since the ferry boats stop operating at 8pm, people have no recourse to any service if there is a crisis “after hours”.

The only service providing institutions within the village are the mosque, primary school, *madrassa*, *moktob*<sup>3</sup>, the local doctor, pharmacy, bazaar and the post office. There are no mazars<sup>4</sup> here which can be found in other areas of Sylhet. There are no MFIs operating in the village.

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<sup>2</sup> Other times they grow a variety of lentils and vegetables.

<sup>3</sup> School for learning to read the Qu'ran

<sup>4</sup> Shrines of holy or pious persons, not always acclaimed saints. Men and women pray there for everything starting from cure to forgiveness.

People only access the Union Parishad for certificates and such documentation needed for foreign travel. They find no further use for the UP. The UP Chairman, an old man and hard of hearing, is shown no respect by the community members and rather joked about behind his back. According to community members, they are themselves both the government and the public – “amrai shorkar, amrai public”. They consider quality of public services to be poor and prefer to use private services, most of which are located in Sylhet city and therefore difficult to access. The community undertakes joint initiatives to build bridges across the canals, distribute relief, etc. Their self reliance is also driven by their grudge against the government for its lack of support in building infrastructure that could transform business opportunities and access to services, and to which they no longer turn to for support. For higher education, health services, financial services such as banks, etc they have to go across the river to the nearest town. Most children attend the madrasa. To attend the high school boys and girls have to go to the next village. Very few girls attend college located in another union, and therefore to attain a higher secondary certificate they have no choice but to attend the madrasa<sup>5</sup> in the village. Religious education (first attending maktob before school) is compulsory for all children.

There is a complete absence of women on the roads, except for a few burkha clad women disembarking from boats. No women or young girls came out to talk to us out of curiosity as seen in most other villages. The conversations held with the “community” during the transect walk and the mapping sessions were essentially with men. The men clearly stated that women do not go out of their houses without reason and never to work. Access to women for conducting case studies was very difficult. Even houses are structured in a manner that limits access to the women’s quarters across the inner courtyard.

#### 4b. Village K, Chittagong

Village K is located 13-14 km from the outskirts of Chittagong city and it takes about an hour and half bus ride to reach the heart of the city. Lying along one of the main link roads to other parts of Chittagong district, this enormous village is bordered with large school buildings with playing fields, apartment buildings, shops, bazaars, small businesses, clinics, NGOs and banks. The interior of the village however resembles a more conventional village with brick houses (some with tin roofs) and agricultural land.

Village K’s economy is also driven mainly by remittance from international migration to the Middle East, with recent forays into Europe and USA in small numbers. Nearly every local family has one or more members abroad. Agriculture is also an important part of the economy with the locals owning large amounts of land, but this scenario is changing. Since a new road is being built to connect the link road to the commercial centre of Chittagong city, agricultural land is being sold to property developers and land prices have sky rocketed. As a result land brokerage is fast becoming a popular profession in Village K.

Village K has a heterogeneous population. The local population consists of old, landed families, rich (landed) and middle income international migrant families, interspersed with middle income business or *sowdagar* (trader) households and relatively poor households engaged in agricultura

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<sup>5</sup> According to the teachers interviewed, parents are keen on madrasa education that gives grounding in religion, but are not keen on education to improve employment options for girls.



work for the rich. There is also a growing internal migrant population, mainly middle income professionals attracted by jobs in Chittagong city living as tenants. There are also colonies<sup>6</sup> of poor migrants from the southern part of Bangladesh drawn in by diverse economic opportunities - factory jobs, daily wage work and small business opportunities for men and factory and domestic jobs for women. Garment, fan, packaged food factories are located near the village.

While there is a near absence of service providing institutions in Village M, Village K is crammed with a range of private and government educational institutions (from kindergarten to colleges), a library, a youth club, bank, numerous mosques as well as several *mazars*. There are private, government and NGO health services in the vicinity. The community clinic is newly established and community members prefer to go to private or NGO services for health care rather than to UPHC. It is unclear whether the dilapidated state of the UPHC is the result of people's preference for private services or whether it is the poor state of the UPHC which deters people from using its services. The educational institutions are old and well-renowned. Most children attend schools, not madrasas. Rising college attendance of girls is driven by girls from professional migrant families.<sup>7</sup> There is intense microfinance activity with ten NGOs working in the village, each having multiple groups of female members. Tailoring shops, jewelry shops and beauty parlours in the village indicate a demand for such services by women. While the main bazaar borders the village, small grocery shops are found everywhere in the village. All this is within the village - just outside the village the choice for services is even wider.

Women are visible in large numbers and of all ages both inside and outside the village walking their children back from school or heavily laden with groceries in their hand. Women encountered during the transect walk stated that they always wear *burkhas* and *neqab*<sup>8</sup> outside the *bari*, for example when going to the bazaar or attending NGO group meetings. Women also came out of their houses when they saw us and invited us to their homes for a chat. Most of the women encountered were NGO members, investing in assets, husband's livelihood, and a few in small businesses of their own.

## 5. Findings

### **5a. The normative context:**

This section draws upon our findings from the transect walk, social and institutional mapping and key informant interviews for an analysis of the normative context of the two villages. The analysis has been structured in terms of social cohesion, religiosity or religious control, family structures and norms around marriage, purdah and work.

#### Village M, Sylhet: Unity to the exclusion of all else

"*Ekota*" (unity) was identified as their most cherished and most valued characteristic about which the community is most proud of in the mapping sessions. "One mosque, one people" was how

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<sup>7</sup> Interviews with teachers suggested that for most of the locals, education is primarily important as a qualification for good marriage, although some parents now think about their daughter's future employment opportunities. Veil covering the face, leaving only the eyes bare

they described themselves with all 450 families of the community praying at the same mosque marking a contrast to their neighbouring village which has nine mosques. However, on the flipside of their sense of unity is their condescension towards the “outsiders”, who live in the “*notun basti*”. Women from *notun basti* who come to Village M to work on government road building projects as part of the “100 days work” are perceived to be shameless because it is considered dishonourable for women to work outside<sup>9</sup>.

In Village M the uncommonly active *panchayat*, formed exclusively of the heads of six families was identified as the most important institution governing their social, religious and economic lives and people appeared to take pride in it. It controls all community activities, undertakes *shalish* (informal arbitration), metes out justice (without gender bias according to the female participant), ensures mandatory religious practices (praying, fasting)<sup>10</sup> are observed strictly according to the Sha’riah. It is an all male domain where women can theoretically attend the meetings but cannot give their opinions unless they are witnesses for any arbitration. Because of the absence of male members due to high international migration, the *panchayat* imposes strict patriarchal and religious control over women, girls and young boys: it controls the mobility of both young men and women, does not allow any musical events or dramas in the village and although it encourages sports, it does so only for boys.

Joint family structure is the norm unless it becomes untenable for economic or other reasons. Even when a household separates it usually remains within the boundaries of the *bari*. Land is generally divided between brothers but without physical demarcations and with the responsibility of cultivation given to one designated brother. Remittances and income from the land is controlled by the head of the family who also controls the expenditure of the entire household. Decision-making of all the households within the almost exclusively joint family set up is taken by the head, who maybe female (mother/ eldest daughter in law) in the absence of the father/son<sup>11</sup>.

The *panchayat* sets certain gender norms such as marriage above the legal age of 18 years, prohibition of cash dowry (any proposal that demands a dowry is immediately refused; the groom’s family is provided with gifts instead of dowry), ensuring married daughters are looked after properly by their in-laws families, setting high amounts of dower or *mohrana* (payable to the bride by the groom’s family) as part of the marriage negotiations. However, love marriages are unacceptable and the *panchayat* deals mercilessly with adultery. It once sanctioned the whipping of a woman of the village who had an affair with a man from another village. Young boys participating in the study as informants asserted the validity of verbal divorce and held strong views against *hilla*<sup>12</sup> marriages and *zena*<sup>13</sup>. Spousal violence however is not condoned. Through these rules it maintains the norms and values of the community and, according to the social mapping participants, ensures conformity and harmony. Prioritizing these values, participants view the residents of the *notun basti* as outsiders and a threat to values of the community, bringing in crime and theft into their area.

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<sup>9</sup> These women are further characterized as thieves, stealing vegetables whenever they get the opportunity.

<sup>10</sup> For example a young boy was made to wear a garland of shoes and parade around the mosque compound to set an example for other boys not to break their fast.

<sup>11</sup> In the absence of the father, the mother becomes the de-facto head, not the son

<sup>12</sup> Marriage to another man if a woman wants to re-marry first husband after divorce

<sup>13</sup> Unlawful intercourse



To maintain purdah women's mobility is restricted to the boundary of their *bari*, that is the notion of purdah is closely linked to the notion of seclusion. If and when they go outside the village they women have to wear the *burkha and neqab* and are always escorted by their mothers-in-law or their husbands. According to male community members, joint family structures limit the need for women to socialize outside of the family, as there are plenty of women within the family with whom they spend time<sup>14</sup>. According to one of the village elders at the social mapping "women do not do anything except eat and sleep".

Norms around men's work is as relevant here just as norms controlling women's work. Men who are not international migrants or not farmers (one male member in each family) are known to be "*bekar*" or unemployed as one might expect, but they are not looking for work – they are simply awaiting their chance to go abroad. For instance among the six brothers in law of Rafia, a respondent,, one is abroad, one looks after the cultivation of their land and the remaining four (one of whom returned from Saudi Arabia six years ago) do not do any work and are referred to as *bekar*. Referring to such men, an influential *panchayat* member said, "*All that these men do is spray on perfume and roam around*". Thus one finds groups of men sitting in the bazaar all throughout the day.

The norm against women's work here is exceptionally strong and the same notions of loss of prestige is associated with women working outside operate whether among the poor or the rich. A poor respondent's husband clearly stated,

*"We don't give our women to work. Isn't it our prestige? Don't we walk these paths? Is it not better that I beg and feed my family and my wife stays at home? Should she be the one working out there and feeding me? Why should they go out to work? The elders will not permit that."*

This is further exemplified by their attitude towards the poor internal migrant women from the *notun basti* who do the 40 days work government project that comes to Village M.

"There are women from *Noakhali and Comilla* here who do this work. They are able to do it because they have no honour."

Every single man and woman we spoke to claimed that it is simply not the custom of the women to work here or earn any kind of income. In fact not working for an income, women believe is a sign of value accorded to women in the perception of both men and women. Only the poorest women were found to sell eggs and cow dung sticks to spend on children's educational needs, mainly stationery.

#### Village K, Chittagong: Inclusionary in the process of transition

In Village K, we find a contrasting set of dynamics to Village M. From conversations held during the transect walk and the mapping sessions, people indicated a disintegration of the notion of '*samaj*' (society) with identifiable elders whom people respect and obey and who customarily play the role of arbitrators. People no longer seek recourse from elders and rely more on the police and courts to settle disputes, which recently overwhelmingly involve land disputes between family

<sup>14</sup> In the week spent in Village M, no women were seen to visit their neighbours.

members or neighbours. Although the dominant notion of a community is seen to have fragmented along social and economic lines, the relationships between these segments is not adversarial but rather of amicable co-existence – where the poor work for the rich and the rich value the poor’s labour in their homes and in their fields and the internal migrants are left alone to lead their lives as they see fit by the locals.

Religiosity is characterized by this *pir-murid* (saint-disciple) culture, with little reference to the Sha’riah laws. The majority of the men and women are disciples of a particular religious leader, a *pir* from Pakistan who holds several *waz* congregations a year where both men and women attend in thousands. The *pir* offers sermons and the people pray together with the *pir*, but apart from this the *pir* does not lay down any religious code of conduct for the people to adhere to. The practice of offering prayers through a *pir* is also manifested in the number of *mazars*<sup>15</sup> in Village K. During the mapping sessions, women identified 7-8 *mazars*, although there are many more. Key informant interviews with those who manage the *mazars* reveal them to be the graves of their fathers or forefathers who were known to be pious. Both men and women go there with specific prayers, for example to recover from illness, etc. and give offerings such as food when their prayers are answered. These *mazars* exercise no authority over the lives of the people. During the mapping session, a distinction was between ‘hot’ *mazars* which are shrines of holy *pirs* praying to whom clearly brings results and those that are not so ‘hot’. Some of the younger women spoke out against some of the *mazars*, saying they are run by frauds. Religious education in *moktobs* is also undergoing a process of decline as perceived by the head of an Islamic primary school, who opened up the school with the express intent of providing religious education parallel to mainstream Bengali education.

According to community members, family structures in Village K are also undergoing transformation. Although households are mostly organized in clan-based clusters or *bari*<sup>16</sup>, there is a growing tendency of the younger generation to move into new houses and apartments near the road, away from the interior of the village and their extended family. This in effect is bringing about change in the patriarchal control exercised at the level of the household, with the increasing tendency of households to break away from joint families, in many cases at the instigation of women.

Here *purdah* is practiced in terms of wearing *burkha* and *neqab*, rather than by restricting women’s mobility inside their homes. Some even wear gloves and socks so that their hands and feet cannot be seen. Girls do not wear *burkhas* to school but most wear a coat-like “stylist” version of it to college. The focus on the attire to maintain *purdah* gives women freedom of mobility. Both girls and boys attend college. Girls wearing their aprons are able to take the bus to attend colleges outside the village. Women of all classes seek health care on their own at the nearby government facilities or in private clinics and hospitals in the vicinity or in Chittagong city. Similarly, women of all classes are also able to go shopping on their own to the village bazaar or in the nearby town or in the city.

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<sup>15</sup> Family members who manage the *mazars* of their relatives stated that they do not exercise any religious authority in the community

<sup>16</sup> *Bari*, which in Village K can consist of up to 40 households belonging to the same family

Although international migration for work is claimed to be the most common livelihood in Village K, various other forms of work opportunity exist for men such as in agriculture, business, trade, skilled and unskilled wage work, etc. Even those who are international migrants engage in such work during the gap years when they are living in the community and upon their return from abroad. Many of the international migrants have businesses that continue to operate such as shops, or land which continues to be cultivated in their absence. Men are not found to be “*bekar*” awaiting their chance to go abroad. Another difference with village M is that here many migrate to Middle Eastern countries for short stints. Sometimes they go abroad to amass money for a particular purpose such as to earn money to cover a daughter’s wedding costs. International migrants from Village M, in particular those who go to the UK and Europe, are absent for many years at a time.

While gender norms in international migrant families and landed families tend to be more conservative in terms of women’s work, these norms tend to be more flexible among the middle and poorer classes. Women from wealthier families in fact perceive that there are no job opportunities for women in the area. Women from solvent and poor families are engaged intensely in MFIs, with each usually belonging to more than one MFI. MFI members invest in cow rearing, businesses such as making and selling tie dye and embroidered clothes, etc and other income generating work, but rarely work for others. Those who do wage work in Village K are either poor local women, mostly those with no husbands or female tenants who have come to the area for the express reason of working. It is not common for local women with husbands to do wage work unless they are very poor.

Middle class tenants have jobs in NGOs and in other organizations, like banks, hospitals, etc., and the poor tenants do domestic work, all kinds of wage work or work in nearby factories.

However, they are quite aware of the fact that they are working against the norm. According to a poor MFI member who used to be a garment factory worker,

*“They (local members of community) say that those who work are not good women. So many men see them. Isn’t it better to stay at home instead? That means husbands will work and women will eat, say their namaz and pray and raise the children.”*

Educated women belonging to solvent households are also subject to the norm. A respondent with a higher secondary certificate said she wanted to be a teacher but her husband told her there is no need:

*“... if I allow you to get a job then people will say that it is because I cannot feed you. The first to say this will be our own family.”*

### **5b. Women’s lives in Village M and Village K: comparison between and within the two contexts**

In this section I use the case studies of women’s life histories in order to understand change – what is conducive and what enables women to bring about change in their lives or not - and we compare the lives of the women and their capabilities between the contexts of the two villages and among women within the same context. Case study respondents were selected mainly

from household survey sample and covered a range of economic class, working status and membership status in MFIs (which was what we were investigating). The case studies were conducted using life history method with 7 to 8 women in each village. The distribution of the 15 women in terms of their basic characteristics is given below:

Resp	Age	Class passed	Eco status	Marital Status	Age at marriage	No of children	Income earning work	MFI membership <sup>17</sup>
<b>Village M</b>								
R1	35	5	Middle	Married	17	8	Sells eggs when excess	
R2	25	0	Poor	Married	15	4	Sells eggs, dungsticks irregularly	
R3	38	0	Poor	Married	16	4	Nil	
R4	25	10	Rich	Married	18	2	Nil	
R5	31	10	Rich	Married	16	2	Nil	
R6	20	SSC	Rich	Married	20	0	Nil	
R7	43	5	Rich	Married	20	7	Nil	
<b>Village K</b>								
R1	48	0	Poor	Married	12	2	Irregular domestic	Yes
R2	40	3	Middle	Married	15	4	Nil	Yes
R3	25	10	Rich	Married	18	1	Nil	Yes
R4	22	4	Poor	Married	14	2	Ex garment worker	Yes
R5	32	9	Rich	Married	16	3	No work	No
R6	41	3	Poor	Separated	13	2	Cow rearing	Yes
R7	42	5	Middle	Married	20	2	Cow rearing	Yes
R8	22	8	Rich	Married	20	1	Nil	No

The comparison will try to bring out how much they are able to negotiate, maneuver and exercise their choice in five key aspects of their lives: marriage, family planning and son preference, intra-household decision making, mobility and isolation, and work and economic agency.

<sup>17</sup> My analysis will refer to MFI membership but it will not be a key analytical category in this paper.

### i. *Marriage*

Marriage is the most important aspiration for women both in Village M and Village K. The case studies reveal commonalities in marriage practices in both communities which are different from marriage practices elsewhere in Bangladesh - relatively greater age at marriage, groom's side giving the bride's jewelry, no cash dowry but gifts such as furniture that are given at the discretion of the bride's family to the groom's, although strictly adhering to conventional levels marking social status of both parties – the higher the status, larger the number of gifts. In Village K, the number and type of furniture to be given and the number of invitees for the wedding dinner and the location of the wedding is decided during the negotiations. In Village M the negotiations are not so rigid and it depends on what the bride's father can afford. The high amount of *mohrana* (dower) which may be in cash (in lakhs) or land (the amount of which women in both villages are aware of), the practice of both parties visiting each other before marriage and thereby gathering concrete evidence of the household situation and frequent natal home visits serve to provide some amount of security to women in marriage in these two villages and mark differences with marriage practices seen elsewhere in Bangladesh. Moreover, in both villages, the bride is presented with a *burkha* along with her trousseau. However, in Village M women have little agency with respect to marriage because their consent is not taken, and women do not feel that there is any need for their consent. They also have little choice with respect to marriage since “love marriages” are unacceptable and unthinkable in Village M. In Village K, women's consent to marriage is sought and their ability to choose marriage partners is changing with increase in love marriages - a phenomenon that parents are slowly habituating themselves to despite some reservation against it. Social interaction between boys and girls and high mobility of both sexes among the younger generation is creating an enabling environment for such relationships to develop in Village K, which is extremely restricted in Village M. Women joked about how young women marry and divorce to claim their dower, much like men divorcing and remarrying for dowry. According to 42 year old Nurjahan,

*“Nowadays, if girls are not shown their prospective husbands before marriage, they do not hesitate to leave their husband if he does not meet their approval. Four or five girls from this village have left their husbands for this reason. Nowadays, even if the wife divorces her husband, she claims her dower.”*

### ii. *Intra-household decision-making*

Irrespective of whether a bride is married to an international migrant or a farmer or a poor sharecropper, every woman in Village M spoke of the same family rules – all decisions regarding their own and their children (including their schooling) are generally dictated by the patriarch or female household head, over which they have no say. In the case of international migrant families, women have even less autonomy if their husbands are abroad. Men usually marry during their brief holiday home and their relationships do not develop enough for women to openly talk to their husbands when they return for subsequent leaves. Spousal relationships are overseen and controlled by the elders, for example by monitoring phone conversations between them and by immediately reporting any complaints (like coming back from natal home late) against the wives. Remittances are sent to her in-laws who control its expenditure. Wives do not have bank accounts, unless she is the head as the mother, or eldest daughter in law in the absence of other elders. None of the respondents have cash in their hand. They do not feel the need to as their needs are generally met by their in laws or husband nor do they have the option to choose what they want:

*Q. We find that in laws buy what their daughter in law needs. Can you ask them for anything you need?*

*Brother in law: She cannot ask for anything.*

*R: My father in law buys me things during Eid.*

*Q. Can you choose what you want?*

*R. No.*

*Q. Can you go to the market to buy something for yourself?*

*R. No. We have no such custom.*

*Q. Can you go to the market to buy something for your children?*

*R: No, my father in law buys what the children need. Even my mother in law cannot go to the market.*

In some situations, the brothers may decide to set up separate households, which affect only the eating arrangements. Since they continue to live within the same bari, other practices (for example mobility) remain the same. Spatial separation from the bari only occurs if the household relocates to the city or abroad. In a nuclear set up, women gain limited decision making authority but only if the husband is present. Speaking of the successive transfer of decision making authority with the progressive break down of their joint family, 31year old Rahela stated that

“When we were all together with my eldest brother in law, we lived by his decisions – going to my natal home, doing anything or going anywhere was all according to his wishes. Then when he set up his own household, all decisions were made by the next eldest sister in law. There was nothing of mine. Now that we have separated (and her husband has returned), our decisions are our own.”

In Village K, marital experiences and household dynamics vary across class. Although women living in joint family structures (more common among international migrants and landed families) still face a degree of patriarchal control by their in laws and husbands, their stories reveal changes in decision making powers. Our case studies reveal that women negotiate with their husbands to relocate near the main road, citing easier access to better colleges outside the village for their children and in general easier access to all kinds of services.

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Thirty six year old Naveen’s description of her marital life with an international migrant while she was living in the joint family is similar to that of the women in Village M. However, since she did not get along with her in laws, she negotiated with her husband to buy land and build a house nearer to the main road, citing easier access to a better college and private tutors for her daughter. She is resisting pressure from her husband and her in laws to marry their daughter off by trying to ensure that she does well in college so that she can attend university. Naveen used to accommodate two of her husband’s nieces, but when they started complaining to her husband about her, she left for her father’s house with her children when her husband came on leave and refused to return unless the nieces were sent back to their parents. Her husband is very disapproving of her going out, but because she lives on her own she takes the children to school, goes to the bazaar, bank, market, and anywhere else she needs to go. Remittance from her husband comes directly to her bank account.

This spatial separation allows women to independently undertake all kinds of household responsibilities, for instance doing daily grocery shopping at the bazaar, taking the children to school, etc. In contrast to Village M, absence of the husband, whether in a joint or nuclear family structure, gives women relatively more freedom in decision making such as when and how



to employ wage labour to cultivate the land, how to manage resources, etc. In Village K, women can be direct recipients of their husband's remittance and have their own bank accounts and greater control over finances although this is a relatively new phenomenon.

Case studies further reveal that women from middle class and poorer families in general exercise a lot of authority in their households and jointly take decisions with their husbands. Children's schooling, purchase of assets, investment related decisions are made through consultation between husband and wife. In female headed households women are in complete charge of resource management.

### *iii. Family planning and Son preference*

In Village M, whether rich or poor, most women here use contraception though not continuously. A few of the older respondents had never used contraception. Despite the use of contraception, families are not small here and having at least four children is quite common, with many having 7-8 children. Even family planning decisions are made by the in laws or husband. Majeda, 43 years, had 7 children because her mother in law wanted the house to be filled with children and did not allow her to take pills or injections. Majeda's sister in law had 8 children for the same reason. According to Majeda,

*"It is not right for me to say no where my in laws want me to have more children even if it is difficult for me. They are my elders, next to my parents. That is why I wanted what they wanted."*

In some cases it was difficult to assess whether respondents give more importance to the number of children she wants or the sex of the children. Twenty five year old Rafia has two sons. She had contraceptive pills for a couple of years after her last child and then stopped because it made her feel sick. Her desired number of children is three and she wants a daughter. When asked what she would do if she does not have a daughter next time she said, *"Allah will give as many children as He has in store for me."* She added that she will continue to have sons until she has a daughter and then take a permanent method.

The use of contraception and the spacing of children is intricately tied to home visits by the international migrant husbands, as it is in Chittagong. During the husband's absence women do not use any form of contraception and would conceive every time their husband came on leave. Twenty year old Muna, recently married didn't want to have children so soon, but did not have a choice because her husband wanted her to become pregnant before he left for Saudi Arabia.

While the poor may take the necessary vaccinations during their pregnancy they do not go for regular ante-natal check-ups as many although not all of the rich do. Most women, both rich and poor, had children at home with a birth attendant. Both rich and poor women seek healthcare - the only difference being that the poor seek it only when it is urgent and go to the doctor within the community, whereas the rich go to doctors in Sylhet or even Dhaka depending upon the severity of the illness. No one goes to the government health services which are also difficult to access, but not as far as Sylhet town.

Son preference is quite prevalent in Village M even though not all clearly admitted to it. Having many children is perhaps one indication of son preference. One poor respondent who has four daughters and one miscarriage stated that she is taking injections to give a break and then try for a son commented, *"is it possible not to have at least one son?"* Son preference is also indicated

in the desire expressed by all the respondents to be cared for by their son and his wife in their old age. Their reluctance to bring their inheritance so that their brothers can improve their households is also an indication of prioritizing boys. This phenomenon is not particular to this context but in keeping with the trend seen in most areas.

Women in Village K can also take decisions regarding family planning and buy contraceptive pills from the pharmacies themselves. Two out of the eight husbands of case study respondents use condoms.

All women in Village K, poor and rich alike, took contraception in between or after the desired number of children. The respondents in Village K had 1 to 2 children except one respondent with three and another with four children. All women also went for regular check-ups during their pregnancies except a non-working middle class member. The poor and the rich accessed different private healthcare services offering services at various costs. Among those who had 1 or 2 children, several had only daughters. The same non-working middle class member was also the only respondent who had more children in order to have more than one son. A mother of three daughters and a son, she said:

*“Everyone wishes for a son; no one wishes for a daughter. People want a son so that he can do the rituals after they die. And isn’t it good to expand one’s own family? People don’t want daughters because of the dowry they have to pay to get them married.”*

The poor working members think differently. One such respondent who has educated her daughters till HSC by rearing cows said,

*“There is no difference between boys and girls. You can raise a daughter just like a son. I don’t have a future because I did not study. I have educated them thinking about their future – I am educating them so that they can stand on their feet.”*

A similar sentiment was expressed by the better off member and non-member respondents. A solvent non-working member stated,

*“I am stopping at one child. Many say that you have a daughter and no son then who is going to bury you? I tell them to leave me above ground when I die.”*

These respondents believe that given the investments made in their daughters, they can look after their parents just as well as sons can, even if they have to obey their husbands. They also believe that women can and should bring their share of inheritance generally left to brothers, especially if the share is large.

#### *iv. Women’s mobility and isolation*

Women’s mobility in Village M is absolutely restricted to the boundary of the *bari*, with access only to the family pond and to the vegetable patch, the latter only accessible to mothers or daughters of the family, not to the bride. Many of the respondents whose natal village is elsewhere stated they had much more freedom to go out and play, to visit their friends and relatives when they were young, but their daughters are not allowed to go anywhere according to the custom in this village. Twenty five year old Rafia stated that apart from the doctor, they are not allowed to go anywhere and always with permission.



*"I can go with two other women if my husband so commands it. If he does not command it then he will shout and beat me for going out...I cannot go anywhere of my own will. I have a husband – I have to ask his permission. "*

All women claimed that the binding on their mobility has to do with family honour and their *ijjat* (prestige). In general women do not visit neighbours and their social life is restricted to kin members. Women do not see this as a problem because though hierarchical, their need for company is satisfied by their good relationships especially with their sisters in law.

Women's interaction with outsiders is highly restricted. We had to explain ourselves and take explicit permission from the head of the family to talk with the women and were refused in one case where the husband was abroad<sup>18</sup>. No photographs were allowed. Since for any services or outings (shopping, visiting *mazars*), they have to cross the river and take public transport, men or elderly female family members always escort women. They have no direct interactions with any kinds of institutions at all and do not feel the need to, as men do the needful. They attend social events like weddings when the whole family is invited, but are not able to participate in any recreational activity in the village. Another indication of their isolation (and patriarchal control) is that though they are wealthy, not everyone has a TV, and even if they do, they do not have cable connection. Moreover, women do not seem to watch much TV and did not express much interest in it.

Women in Village K use *burkhas* and *neqabs* to maintain their purdah but also to circumvent restrictions on their mobility. Newly married women or women with small children have relatively greater restrictions on their mobility. Wearing *burkha* and *neqab*, women are able to take their children to school, go to the bazaar, market, bank, doctor, NGO offices, Chittagong city, and go visiting on their own.

Women in Village K have much greater exposure to the outside world, which in turn changes perceptions regarding gender norms and expands women's social networks. First, their mobility increases their exposure to people beyond their family and community and increases interactions between migrant and local populations. In contrast to Village M, this interaction exposes them to different ways of 'being and doing' that seems to have influenced changes in ideas about women's education and work, revealed in their aspirations for their daughters. Second, direct dealings with the various institutions<sup>19</sup> mentioned above, enables them to critically assess services, negotiate, make informed decisions, carry out transactions, interact with men and have own opinions in household decision-making. A working member respondent who spoke about their ability to talk to people:

*"I can now talk to people, go to different offices and talk to the officers there."*

Most women are also likely to buy insurance and have their own bank accounts. Third, women avidly watch cable TV that exposes them to alternate lifestyles and practices, which seems to have an effect on their imaginations of what women can do. As Nurjahan, wife of an ex- international

<sup>18</sup> Women with husbands abroad are strictly guarded from outsiders. Thus our respondents consisted of women whose husbands have returned, or have come home on leave or are not international migrants

<sup>19</sup> Women particularly mentioned that membership in NGOs expands their networks (through their informal groups) and enhances their agency (undertake income generating activities, make financial plans, save)

migrant told us, “I could dress up in pants and a shirt and take you around Chittagong city”, although she does not step outside without her burkha and neqab.

#### v. Work and Economic agency

Although at first glance work norms seem to be similar in the two villages in terms of its disapproving attitude towards women working, there is a fine distinction between the norms that marks the difference in what women in Village M and Village K can do.

In Village M, the prevalent norm not only disapproves of women working for others or working outside the household - it rejects women doing any kind of income earning work regardless of whether it is outside or inside the household. Earning an income is simply not the role of women, it is solely the man’s role.

A well-off female respondent provided a checklist of the ifs and buts that circumscribe women’s options to work in Village M:

*“Women from our community do not go out to work. We do not go to the fields. It is forbidden in my family to do any kind of income earning work. Perhaps if one got a job it might be considered. But girls will not be allowed to go here or there for a job, or work in this household or that for money. At best if she is highly qualified and the job requires and values her education, she may be allowed to do that, but not just for money. Suppose someone goes to brother-in-law and says that a girl from your family works here, will that not be a matter of dishonor? Government jobs may be permitted but not those government jobs where you have to transfer files or serve tea.”*

Here a high paying job does not fall into any kind of consideration as income is not the issue – the issue is whether the job enhances the woman and her family’s honour so much so that it overrides the loss of honour that is commonly associated with having a job.

These norms and further the restriction on mobility also implies that even the poorest women cannot take any opportunity to work outside the bari. Dilruba, wife of a poor sharecropper with eight children stated,

*“No, we don’t go out. Don’t I have a husband? Is this not my husband’s house? I have older brothers in law and others in the family. Will they let me go out? Whether we eat or starve, you have to stay indoors.”*

Excepting for the one or two very poor families where the women sell eggs and dung sticks we did not find any women earning income from cow or poultry rearing or sewing kanthas which many do for household use and consumption.

It is not surprising therefore, that women in Village M have no cash in their hand unless they are the de facto household head. Most wives of international migrants, and all of those who were our respondents, had absolutely no economic agency in terms of the money that their husbands sent for the family as the money is sent to meet specific expenses of all members of the joint family. Neither did they have any agency in relation to the dower that is promised to them in their marriage. Cash *mohrana* is only payable if the wife decides to divorce the husband although

women also get land in their name as *mohrana* but the land is not theirs to dispose off. When asked if she could decide to sell the land, for instance to pay for her daughter's wedding, one respondent stated, "*It can be sold if my husband orders it.*" Often times that land is sold off for various purposes of the family, such as to pay for the cost of international migration. Women are not consulted in the household decisions pertaining to resource management.

In contrast to Village M, women in Village K are not bound either way in terms of earning an income even among those classes where women are not allowed to work for others. Here income earning is not associated with the loss of honour or prestige. The latter comes into question only in the case of working for others or working with men. Thus one finds women from solvent families (not in real need for extra income) rearing cattle for sale, producing and selling embroidered or tie dyed materials, managing family owned grocery stores. This is to a large extent due to the opportunity provided by their membership in MFIs. With ten MFIs operating in the area, each with multiple groups, it was in fact very difficult to find women from poor and solvent households who are not members. The loans they provide to their husbands for family business or in agriculture or in paying for costs involved for international migration seems to provide an entry point for them to engage in discussions around business and financial plans. In the case of women who use the loans themselves, the husbands pay the installments but the women get to retain the income and/or profit from their investment. NGOs also allow women to save and use the savings as they see fit – women from both poor and solvent families spent their savings on buying Eid gifts, buying furniture, using it to pay for costs such as daughters' wedding, etc. Poor women were more likely to re-invest their savings in productive assets or invest in their household such as to repair their home, etc. Some women were even found to maintain savings secretly from their husbands, mainly for investments in their children's higher education.

The availability of work and the notion of *purdah* that enables them to go into the public domain enable most poor women to take up outside paid work (domestic work, factory work, crop processing, restaurant cook, office cleaner). Although it is not preferred among the poor with husbands to work for others, issues of survival and improving the economic condition of the household trumps the issue of honour and prestige. The high visibility and mobility of women within and outside the village, whether going to work, taking children to school, doing the grocery, going to the bank, going to the NGO office and their interaction with people because of these chores, creates an enabling environment to take up work that involves being outside, working for others and dealing with men.

All respondents in Village K, whether poor members or well-off non-members, showed some level of economic agency – from being in complete control of their finances in female headed households to supporting family business or international migration through micro-credit. International migration effect was also seen among those non-member respondents living in nuclear families whose husbands are or were abroad where they manage the finances of their family and take joint decisions when it comes to big investments or decisions regarding their children. A connection between having economic agency and courage or self-confidence was expressed in different ways. One poor member, who till recent times used to buy and breed cows with MFI loans till they got stolen said,

*“I used to have courage, but no longer now. I have no courage since my cows got stolen. Earlier I had the courage to take loans without any worries. I could run up a bill of 5-6 thousand takas at the grocery store and not worry about how I would pay the bill.”*

Overall, women in Village K were visible, mobile, financially savvy, responsible in their loan transactions, capable of critically assessing quality and service of institutions, exerting a certain control over their household and future, and keen on making greater investments in their children’s future.

## 6. Discussion

The two case studies of villages suggest that despite similarities in the context, there are layers of dissimilarities which are not always immediately apparent and which determine to an extent, choices women have and shape their agency in taking advantage of these choices.

The three dissimilarities that clearly emerge and which have an impact on women’s lives are the *samaj*, economy and connectivity.

Village M epitomizes structural rigidity with its deeply entrenched rules, norms and practices that influence behaviour, define values and shape choices. The conditions within which choices are made is effectively “an absence of alternatives”, as the possibility of alternatives is resolutely guarded against both by deep-rooted structures of family, kinship, patriarchy and economy, and rejection of any norm or value different from their own encapsulated in the “powerful ideology of ‘togetherness’” (Kabeer 1999:460)

In Village M the *samaj* has a formal shape in the form of an all powerful *panchayat* which dictates both religious and cultural practices for the entire community, both men and women, and ensures that these norms prevail and resist change through strict enforcement and punitive measures. Their control over women is exercised through restrictions on their mobility enforcing of not only wearing the *burkha* but also seclusion from any outside influence; setting the norm of strict patriarchal control over women’s decision making within the household and relationship with husband; limiting women’s choice in marriage; and by making the choice to earn an income null and void. On the other hand, the *panchayat* plays a protective role by ensuring that families maintain the norms of providing for women’s basic needs and sanctioning against violence and dowry. This is seen by men and women as an expression of the value they give to women.

Despite the influx of remittance from international migration, the economy of Village M is static. Most men are either international migrants or sitting idle, waiting to go abroad. The remaining are farmers who despite having large amounts of land do not invest in agriculture and are happy to grow only one crop. When in need for cash, they would rather sell portions of their land than engage in any income earning work like business or trade or migrate to other areas within the country for work. The static nature of the economy further discourages NGOs to operate in the area, omnipresent in the rest of the country including many parts of Sylhet<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> NGOs operating in the vicinity characterized the men as lazy, unwilling to work for regular income.

Village M is physically remote due to its location across the mainland on the other side of the river and because of poor communication with nearby towns. This detracts service providers such as health workers, teachers, etc. from operating in the area. It is also noteworthy that Village M does not have cable television preventing the inflow of new ideas and information, particularly for women. This is exacerbated by the insular mentality of the men that rejects any practices and attitudes that differ from their own within the community.

Village K in contrast is an example of a community experiencing rapid changes in the very same structures mentioned in the case of Village M. There is diminishing importance of the *samaj* and its normative control due to the increasing reliance on state institutions like police and court to maintain discipline and harmony in the community, and growing heterogeneity of the community due to the influx of migrants. Its growing irrelevance is manifested in the increasing trend particularly among international migrant families to form nuclear households and relocate away from *baris*. This is not to say that patriarchal norms and control at the household level have disappeared. Husbands continue to embody these norms and attempt to assert some control over women's agency.

The economy of Village K is also undergoing changes. Diminishing dependence on agriculture with increasing sale of land to property developers has not had a negative effect on the economy because of diverse wage work, business and trade opportunities. Upon their return, international migrants start businesses or get jobs (for example in construction). Economic opportunities not only attract internal migrants looking for work, but also service providing institutions including NGOs which can benefit from transactions with an economically vibrant community. This has led to rapid growth and proliferation of the service providing industry such as hospitals, banks, markets, etc, expanding peoples' choices.

Village K is remote neither physically nor ideationally. Communication with the metropolitan city is improving with new roads. The influx of migrants, both professional and poor, has brought in new practices and ideas. Cable TV has brought in a new world into their homes. Moreover, there is a sense of openness in the mentality of the community that welcomes and accommodates outsiders and all that they bring with them.

What is the implication of these contextual characteristics in terms of expansion of choices for women? How do women in the two villages respond to their context? Do all women have the same outcomes within the same context?

In Village M there is little scope for expansion of any choices for women because of the entrenched nature of social control. Patriarchal control became most apparent in women's responses to questions around agency in Village M. Where they could exercise choice, for example by insisting on taking consent of their daughters in their marriage, or adopting family planning methods, they choose to conform. This may be due to the fact that they have internalized these values and practices, possibly reinforced by the fact that they are well taken care of. The strict patriarchal control backed by religious orthodoxy derived from Quranic texts and Islamic learning (Gardner 1998) reinforces all the ideas and behaviours associated with it.

On the other hand, women in Village K who also have to contend with religiosity, patriarchy and fallouts of international migration as the women in Village M, however manage to push boundaries of gender norms, grab opportunities and gain some autonomy or control over their lives. The type and expression of religiosity practiced here in contrast to Village M and the difference in patriarchal control make for very different outcomes and agency for women in

Village K. Structural changes, although occurring due to external forces, are expanding the scope of choices, “from the vantage point of alternatives” (Kabeer 1999: 460) for women, who are taking advantage of the change to negotiate their own autonomy and thereby reinforcing the changes. Women are taking advantage of the community’s transitional phase to negotiate with their husbands to set up nuclear households. Increased mobility and higher education of girls is facilitating own choice in marriage. Nonetheless, women still have to deal with control exercised by their husbands, especially with regard to women’s work and aspirations for their daughters.

The static nature of the economy in Village M offers almost no economic opportunities for women, including opportunities provided by NGOs for self employment. Hence there is no scope for women to exercise any agency related to work or income earning. What few opportunities are available are confined to low paid wage work for poor women.

The expansion of income earning opportunities and the facility of microcredit is changing women’s economic activities in Village K, particularly among the middle class and the poor. Despite the fact that the norm dictates working for others as not preferable, self employment with the help of microcredit makes it possible for women to earn an income even among the relatively conservative middle class families. Village K lends evidence to the fact that norms against women’s work can change with opportunities of work. Women are able to contribute to the household, have some say in household decision making and have savings and cash in hand to spend at their own discretion. Furthermore, NGOs including those which provide microcredit play a significant role in raising awareness among women, particularly among the poor in rural Bangladesh and have contributed in changing attitudes towards education, health care and economic participation. With ten of them successfully operating in Village K, it can be assumed that they have had considerable influence on women’s attitudes and practices in these matters.

Women in Village M are “disconnected” in both senses of the word. Physical remoteness severely limits scope for women’s mobility and exposure to the outside world. Mobility is made so much more difficult when there is no space for exercising it. Moreover, since men do not do any regular income earning work, they are always available to run errands that would otherwise take women out and take decisions that women would otherwise have to take. Isolation from new ideas and alternate gender practices appears to make women less able to conceive changes in their own practices and lives. They believe that these norms have to be maintained through the generations reflected in the interpretation of the idiom “*agor aag, bagor bag*”<sup>21</sup> offered by 43-year old Majeda, mother of 7 children, that young girls will follow in the footsteps of the ones before her. They cannot conceive of any other future for their children other than what they witness around them (i.e., marriage for girls, migration for sons). For their own future, they can only conceive of relying on sons.

On the other hand, it is connectivity that gives women space to maneuver in Village K. Physical connectivity to a wide range of institutions and services makes it simpler for women to negotiate for their autonomy with their family in accessing them – to take on all household responsibilities including those that entail going out, especially given that men are at work all day or are absent as in the case of international migrants. Exposure to alternate gender norms and practices has been crucial in expanding the imaginations of women, to dare to think and act differently. If the consequences of choice is evaluated in terms of the extent to which it can transform structural conditions, it is at its nascent stage, particularly for women belonging to prosperous families, however, its transformatory potential lies, if not in changing their own lives, but certainly in the aspirations for their daughters.

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<sup>21</sup> According to other Sylheties, it actually means, those who lead are ahead, those who follow fall back.



In Village M, there is very little difference between women's agency in poor and wealthy households. Local poor women cannot avail any of the few income earning opportunities that are available because of social control. Neither can they avail NGO loans for self employment which could have been more socially acceptable as mentioned by two of our case study respondents. Unlike poor women in other parts of the country, in Village M poor women are bound by social and patriarchal norms that do not allow them any agency to work to even feed themselves. According to a poor respondent,

*"We have Allah and we have ourselves. There will be good days and there will be bad days. Sometimes my children will starve. Sometimes we will eat three meals and other days two meals."*

Women in prosperous households eat better, get better clothes, can educate their children better, get better healthcare than poor women but can do nothing more than their poor counterparts in terms of bringing changes into their lives. Breaking away from a joint household set-up to a nuclear household upon the return of her international migrant husband may offer some gains in terms of agency as suggested by a 31 year old respondent from a prosperous household:

*"At first my eldest brother in law was the head and he took all the decisions. I was not free living under him. Going to visit my family, going anywhere, everything was according to his word. He gave clothes when I needed. He decided which school the children should attend. After he separated his household, we were transferred to my older sister in law's responsibility. If my husband brought back gifts, she would distribute them amongst everybody. If I was given something, I would have it; otherwise not. Now I am free; I can do as I please."*

There are nuanced differences between what women from the different classes in Village K can do but it is more a matter of degree. Economic strength enables women to have more positive gender outcomes even when their agency is limited. The relatively wealthier groups can afford better food, housing, clothes and can conceive of bigger investments in their livelihoods, access better quality healthcare but none of these are unachievable by relatively poorer women, although perhaps of lower quality or at a smaller scale. On the other hand, women from poorer households are hugely supported by microcredit to replace the lack of capital, can avail a variety of economic opportunities, send their daughters to the same schools, and aspire for them to have better jobs and better lives.

When it comes to control over life one finds that it is the poorest women of female headed households who has the upper hand. Thus we find a solvent member respondent in Village K vividly laying out the whole sequence of transfer of patriarchal control in these terms:

*"I cannot control my life. Before marriage I was under the control of my father, my uncles; after marriage I am now under the control of my husband and my in laws. But even if I cannot control everything in my life, I can still do some things."*

Despite exercising their agency demonstrated in the way that they navigate through various limiting norms of the community, most married poor women also perceive that they do not have full control over their lives because they have to ultimately obey their husbands. It was the poorest female heads of households who most clearly stated that they have full control over their lives: *"I have no obstacles to run my life exactly the way I want to."*

## 7. Conclusion

Regional contrasts are important to understand social change but as long as the underlying socio-cultural factors remain only a matter of speculation, there is bound to be contradictory claims in relations between particular variables or outcomes such as female literacy and empowerment or gender bias in child survival and poverty (Murthi, Guio and Drèze, 1995). Trying to explain changes in any one social development indicator may also not be sufficient “to capture the mutually reinforcing nature of the changes”(Mahmud 2008:82). Additionally, spatial disparity in women’s capabilities and outcomes must be addressed through sex disaggregated data within regions to reduce gender and spatial differences in performance.

Regional effects are reduced when one goes further into micro-analysis to the analysis at community and household levels (Faguet and Ali 2009; Balk 1997). While region may explain a large share in the variance of a certain variable between two villages, for instance mobility, this share may be modified when the analysis is taken to the village and the household level. Thus like Balk (1997), we too find that women who live in villages where others are mobile, or where others are departing from the prevalent gender norms, are more likely to be mobile, even in a “conservative region”. In village M seclusion is doubly reinforced by household and village gender norms, dearth of institutions and by the context that is disconnected. In Village K, household norms which could have been a constraining factor are made more lenient by the connectivity and interaction with all forms of institutions. These factors therefore need to be disentangled and clearly spelt out so that better questions may be asked, which can point to new directions in policymaking with regard to improving social development indicators and doing so uniformly across Bangladesh.

Finally, the assumptions we make about how certain variables will impact upon behaviour and practices of the people may not be in the direction that we expect. We therefore need to re-examine assumed relationships between gender outcomes and community characteristics such as patriarchal control, social cohesion and religiosity, as these concepts are not undifferentiated. Social change that fosters changes in attitudes and practices towards women’s participation in society and in the economy, and women’s connectivity to and engagement with institutions is needed especially when our focus is on economic growth, which relies heavily on liberalization and economic incentives (Drèze and Sen 1995).

Patriarchal control arises as a key issue in determining social change. In the two villages discussed the degree to which patriarchal control is exercised varies – one where there is extreme control and the other where it seems to be loosening with the break-up of joint family household structures and through processes of urbanization. In the case of the latter, the breakdown seems to be fostering the social change. These changes may not be the same for all women within a particular context. We find that women belonging to landed international migrant households with old money in Village K have lives resembling that of women in Village M. It is women belonging to international migrant families who have no land but are engaged in business or trade in Village K who appear to be more flexible in adopting new attitudes and behavior than their landed counterparts. Moreover, even in the context where patriarchal control seems to be looser because of the agency women exercise in certain areas of their lives, control may still be stringent in other aspects. Thus while patriarchal control may be lax in terms of women’s mobility outside her home, it may not act in the same way in terms of women’s authority inside her home. Therefore the degree of patriarchal control as well as its scope must be understood.



Social cohesion in some forms may not be desirable for social change, particularly social cohesion that insulates the community from all outside forces, progressive or otherwise and enforces cohesion to the detriment of particular group or class of people within the community. On the other hand, we find the breakdown of social cohesion, for instance in the form of the *samaj*, may have a positive impact for social change allowing for new forces to come into play and perhaps aiding in the forging of other forms of social cohesion such as networks of micro credit groups (Zeller 1998). This kind of social cohesion that inculcates inclusive attitudes and behaviour may trigger social change.

Much more care needs to be given in using religiosity to explain differences in outcomes. On the one hand, we need to be careful about the variables we use to measure religiosity and on the other hand, we need to differentiate between types of religiosity.

Different studies have used different proxies to measure religiosity such as women or girls wearing *burkha/hijab* when going out, praying five times a day or praying regularly, etc. The community level data of the broader research on which this paper is based in fact found Sylhet to be characterized by low religiosity because of some of the variables it chose to form the religiosity index (discussed in Section 3). The level of religiosity in our sample villages for instance cannot be captured by the number of religious associations or number of *waz mehfil*s in the past year or the number of mosques. This brings us to the question of the type of religiosity.

The *pir-murid* culture is prevalent in both Sylhet and Chittagong divisions. Believers conceive *pirs* to be guides for teaching people holy ways and act as an intermediary with God and vehicles for miracles. However, economic transformations due to migration may lead to a gradual rejection of *pirs* as charismatic leaders who perform miracles to *pirs* whose knowledge and power rests upon scriptures and notions of orthodoxy. Furthermore, there are the most orthodox who disclaim any allegiance to *pirs* (Gardner 1998). In Village K we found a vibrant *pir-murid* culture where people visit some of the *mazars* of local *pirs* at various moments of crisis, where there is a widespread allegiance to the *pir* from Pakistan and a number of *waz mehfil*s are conducted by all of the mosques in the village every year. In Village M, we find what is closer to Islamic purism defined as “increasing influence of Quranic text reference of the Shar’iat and stress on *adab* or correct procedures” (Gardner 1998:2). This is closely associated with the enrichment and rise in social status of migrant families, while the poor are left to rely on miracles from their charismatic *pirs* (Gardner 1998). Associations can be drawn between the differences in the way religion is practiced in the two villages with women’s *purdah* and agency in these two villages. We find that where orthodox Islam is practiced, women’s *purdah* takes on the form of seclusion and limits women’s agency; where *pir-murid* culture is prevalent, and women’s *purdah* is manifested in a garb that facilitates women’s agency.

## Annex 1

	Urban %	Rural %	Chittagong %	Sylhet%
No education (ever married 15-49 year old)	19.3	27.2	21.6	31.8
Median years completed(ever married 15-49 year old)	6.8	4.3	6.3	3.9
Does not access newspaper TV or radio at least once a week (ever married 15-49 year old)	21.3	57.6	43.6	64.1
Currently employed (ever married 15-49 year old)	31.1	33.9	26.3	18.4
Median age at first marriage(ever married 20-49 year old)	16.9	15.8	16.8	17.6
Total fertility rate	2.0	2.4	2.5	2.9
Ideal family size	2.1	2.2	2.4	2.5
Currently married women between 15-49 years using any method of contraception	65.9	61.1	55.0	47.8
Women between 15-49 who had live birth in last 3 years receiving any kind of ANC <sup>1</sup>	89.3	74.6	74.4	62.4
Live birth in the past 3 years delivered at home	42.3	69.1	64.4	76.6
Can go to health centre or hospital alone or with children	74.7	68.7	68.0	64.3
Currently married women between 15-49 years who cannot take any of the four decisions either herself or jointly with husband <sup>2</sup>	12.5	17.5	17.8	24.2
Currently married women between 15-49 years who agree husband is justified for hitting or beating his wife for arguing with him	17.1	21.1	21.6	24.7
Currently married women between 15-49 years who agree husband is justified for hitting or beating his wife for going out without telling him	12.2	15.3	13.8	16.3

**Table 1: Women's demographic and fertility indicators and women's empowerment and health seeking behavior by urban and rural locations and Chittagong and Sylhet divisions**

Source: Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey 2014, National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT), Mitra and Associates, and ICF International.2016.

1 More than 50% (comparatively higher in Chittagong) received care from private sector

2 Four specific decisions: 1) Woman's own healthcare; 2) Making major household purchases; 3) Child health care; 4) Visits to her family or relatives

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