

# Children's migration for work in Bangladesh: The extra- and intra-household factors that shape 'choice' and 'decision-making'<sup>1</sup>

Karin Heissler

Karin.heissler@sant.ox.ac.uk

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## Introduction

This article derives from fieldwork carried out for my D.Phil thesis in four villages in Madhupur *upazila* (or sub-district) and several industrial areas in and around Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. The subject of my thesis is 'choice' in children's independent and internal migration for work. My findings are based on in-depth discussions using both individual and collective techniques, observation and life histories with 35 migrant girls and 23 migrant boys whose age at first migration ranged from approximately 7 to 18 years-old (but who currently are between 14 and 25 years-old), as well as 105 parents, siblings, friends, peers and neighbours.

In order to understand children's choice and decision-making in their migration for work it is necessary to understand the context in which choices and decisions are made. It has been argued that social and economic life are structured by the principles of generation (Alanen, 2003) and gender (Mayall, 2003), and this is certainly the case in Bangladesh (Aziz and Maloney, 1985). In Bangladesh, as in much of the 'majority' world (that is, 'developing' countries where the vast majority of the world's population resides), work is central to children's roles and responsibilities as members of households (Boyden *et al.*, 1998; Punch, 2001; Schildkrout, 1978). Although most children work locally – boys are more likely to find paid work, but they also do unpaid work at home, and most girls engage in unpaid domestic work for their own homes – some girls and boys do, however, migrate for work to cities, peri-urban areas or to other villages for paid work or to ease the economic burden on their household.

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Certain major assumptions have been made about children that feed into the dominant paradigm that children who migrate for work have been 'forced' and have had no 'choice' (O'Connell Davidson and Farrow, 2007), a number of which derive from the way in which the 'household' has been conceptualised. The first is that children are seen as dependents within a 'nurturing' household that protects them from the functioning of the market and keeps them excluded from the division of labour (Zelizer, 1994; Zelizer, 2005:214). This corresponds with a division of labour that is seen as gendered and aged: adult men focus on paid work in the public sphere and adult women focus on unpaid work within the domestic sphere (Folbre, 1994:23). Within this model of the household, authority and decision-making primarily rests with men because they tend to earn the most money, yet decisions are seen as being made for the collective good of the household (Folbre, 1994:23). Children, however, are seen as 'consumer goods' and not economic contributors or producers within households (Folbre, 1994). As Mayall (2002) points out, this is a white, middle-class bias as many children in the 'minority' world (or 'developed' countries), let alone in the 'majority' world, are in fact economic contributors (Mayall, 2002).

In the context of migration studies, the household is acknowledged as playing a role in choice and decision-making and being as being affected by migration (Boyle *et al.*, 1998). Children, however, mostly appear as passive: their roles within households are barely acknowledged, let alone visible (Whitehead and Hashim, 2005). Caroline Brettel (Brettel, 2000:101) and others (Boyle *et al.*, 1998) draw attention to migration as a household-based survival strategy that occurs at certain phases of the household life cycle, thereby acknowledging the role of generation. However, children largely appear as affected by migration rather than as participants - for example, as being left behind (Brettel, 2003:190), or as passive followers of migrant parents (Whitehead and Hashim, 2005).

When children migrate on their own, however, a preoccupation with trafficking blinds research to other forms of children's unaccompanied movement (Anderson and O'Connell Davidson, 2005). If children leave the household without being accompanied by one or more parent, it is primarily seen as being due to a parent's decision - for example, due to poverty; or as a response to a 'dysfunctional' household, so children 'run away' (Blanchet, 1996); or due to their naïveté and innocence, reflecting to a 'sentimental' view of childhood (Zelizer, 1994), which makes them easily taken advantage of and exploited, and likely victims of 'traffickers' (Whitehead and Hashim, 2005).

Empirically-tested and theoretically-oriented research undertaken in several developing countries (including Bangladesh) raises questions and doubts about these views, however, and shows that children's unaccompanied migration for work is not necessarily about force. It may comprise a household-based and risk-averse strategy for maximising income and/or to lessen one's burden on the household (Afsar, 2002: 90; Blanchet, 1996; Khair, 2005). It may also serve to strengthen kinship ties for survival and economic betterment of the household (Leinaweaver, 2007); involve a search for autonomy and adventure (Thorsen, 2007); reflect a concern about education and skill development (de Lange, 2007; Hashim, 2005); and/or be part of identity-building (Punch, 2007). It may even constitute an established rite of passage, especially for boys (Kuhn, 2004; Toufique, 2002: 24) and it is also a process embedded in gendered social relations (Hashim, 2005). Nevertheless, gaps in knowledge about the processes and institutions behind children's migration for work remain.

For example, in Bangladesh, migration is seen as a critical strategy in the livelihoods of rural households, and migrants are recognised as usually being young people (Toufique, 2002). However, children (especially girls) and young women are seen as being forced to leave their households because of poverty (Hossain *et al.*, 2005: 116) and because children are socialised to obey their parents (Blanchet, 1996). Research on children has, however, been influenced by the global literature and advocacy around children's rights (Bissell, 2000) and reflects an absence of nuanced considerations of the structures children engage with, including the household. Thus in Bangladesh, a tendency in research to focus on exploited and abused children draws attention to dysfunctional households and social and economic poverty, which 'force' children to leave the household and/or that leaves them with very little 'choice'. Moreover, focus is often drawn towards a narrow construction of gender (Kabeer, 2001). Ashraful Aziz and Maloney (1985) describe expected behaviours and roles of children and adolescents as highly gendered with "very little overlap" (Aziz and Maloney, 1985: 8). This distorts conceptualisations and understandings of children's migration for work, including the role of the household.

### **'Households' in Madhupur**

According to census data, the 'household' is defined as "persons, either related or unrelated, living together and taking food from the same kitchen" (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2007: 5). I observed that many children live in two-generation households

comprising one or more parents and unmarried children, and other family members live nearby, occasionally in the same compound, but usually in another discrete household. A minority of households – often wealthier – were three generation or more, and comprised parent(s); unmarried children; a grandparent (usually a grandmother); and possibly a newly married son and his wife.

The most usual type of household unit is patrilineal (Aziz, 1979: 49) (meaning that line of descent is traced from the male line) and marriage is most commonly ‘patrilocal’ or ‘virilocal’ (meaning that after marriage the bride moves to her husband’s family home) (Sultana, 2005: 178). Jitka Kotalová observes that there is a ‘cultural-geographical orientation’ to the ‘recruitment’ of wives or ‘placement’ of daughters and that the distance between the two localities is “assessed practically” (Kotalová, 1996: 166,168). Kotalová’s findings are consistent with my observations: it is a common practice for girls’ marriages to be arranged to men from other villages but from within the same region. However, I also observed that ‘matrilocal’ residence (Aziz, 1979: 49) is practised in some households whereby sons-in-law settle with, or in separate households situated near their wives’ parents. It was explained to me that this occurs because the work opportunities available in the Madhupur area are better than in the husbands’ home villages.

### **Situating the ‘Household’ in Wider Context**

In Bangladesh, in order to understand choice and decision-making in relation to children’s migration for work, it is necessary to understand the impact of social and economic change on rural households and what goes on within them. This is because the household is the key site where the choices and decisions about migration for work are shaped and framed, although extra-household factors and influences, such as the expansion of schooling, also affect and shape migration choices and decisions.

#### *Expansion in Education*

Children are supposed to start school at the age of six and primary school ends with the successful completion of Class Five (when they are 10 years-old). Secondary school is between Classes Six and Ten, which is supposed to correspond with 11 to 15 year-olds (Kabir, 1999). However, nationwide, and consistent with my findings across all classes, there exists a large proportion of overage children due to late enrolment and repetition (Kabir, 1999; Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), 2005b).

Overage children aside, unlike their parents, more children are in school or have had an experience in school than in previous generations, and experience in school is widening as a result of state and non-governmental (NGO) interventions to increase and improve education opportunities for children, especially girls (Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), 2005a; Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), 2005b). In Madhupur, NGO, government, semi-government (meaning, partially funded by government and partially from other sources) funded education and *madrassah* (Islamic religious schools), were prevalent in almost all the villages and/or were available and accessible in an adjacent village.

In the early primary school years, I observed that most girls and boys (regardless of household wealth) went to the school situated closest to their home. However, most children, especially among the poorest households, often went late or did not attend regularly. By the secondary level, discontinuation or drop-out was marked among girls and boys at and around the age of puberty, unless they came from wealthier households.

According to Census data (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2007: 215-217) available for my fieldsites, between the ages of 5 and 9 years, most children do not attend school (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2007: 215-217). At the secondary level, across all four villages, the proportion of girls and boys not attending decreases. However, at the upper secondary and post secondary level, the vast majority of girls and boys do not attend. Of the children (migrant and non-migrant) who I got to know, the findings were similarly mixed: although most had had some experience of schooling, there were variations by village and *para* (neighbourhood) within villages.

Education and state policy towards schooling fundamentally alters the conditions of children's lives (Levine, 2007), however, and although many children are not attending, expansion in primary and secondary schooling has resulted in a re-shaping and extension of 'childhood' in Bangladesh (Blanchet, 1996). Education also creates 'new' aspirations of and for children for higher status work – *chakri* - most of which is not available at home. *Chakri* is a term used to describe waged work that provides a fixed income that is entered into through a contract. It is also associated with having a job that requires being able to read and write, which denotes status. For the children in my fieldsites, very little *chakri* is available unless they come from a wealthy household and make good progress in school, at least to the point of the completion of college, if not university, and this is out of reach

for most of the children and parents I interacted with. Yet schooling affects the aspirations of girls and boys and, for some, is a factor in shaping 'choice' in migration for work. For example, from one village, the mother of one migrant boy remarked, "*if you are educated there is not much work [here] or here the status of the work is low so you feel embarrassed doing it.*"

Education also creates 'new' obligations of parents to children, which many mothers and fathers told me are difficult to meet. Parents need money for their children's education because, starting from the primary level, there are official and unofficial fees and costs (Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), 2005a). Also, children may want a different life (for higher status *chakri*) that cannot always be met by staying at home. Other children migrate because their aspirations have changed as a result of school, but this is not the only change that puts pressures on households. Transitions in rural economies also play a role.

#### *Land, Livelihoods and the Household*

Official census data on land ownership only exists at the Madhupur *upazila* level. It shows that 64.4% of dwelling households own agricultural land (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2007:39). This does not, however, capture the size of holdings, disparities between richer and poorer households and pressures related to and affecting land ownership. I therefore undertook my own informal census. Aware of the sensitivity of asking information about assets, including land, I deliberately waited until the end of my fieldwork to ask this question.

Almost all household heads owned at least their house and the land underneath. Many households, including those with migrant working children, had additional agricultural land on which they grew rice and/or other crops for the household's consumption or for surplus to sell. Size of landholdings varied, however. I was informed that households are no longer able to exclusively rely on their land to meet their consumption and material needs and that over time, the size of plots has diminished due to the increasing need for money, which leads to selling or mortgaging land and, in some instances, false land cases and corruption that often leads to the loss of land. My findings concerning the decline in exclusively land-based rural livelihoods are consistent with national level data.

Nationwide, over half of rural households are 'functionally landless' which means they have less than 0.2 hectares of land (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2007: 16) and although the number of landless households is declining, functional landlessness is increasing (Toufique, 2002: 17). New livelihood opportunities, including at the lower end of the occupation scale, have, however, been created in 'rural' areas as a result of increasing electrification, expansions in the physical infrastructure including roads, and the growth of marketing and commercial sectors (Toufique, 2002: 11, 23). In Madhupur, many men and boys supplement what little (if any) income they earn from their land by buying or renting a rickshaw or cycle-van to earn money peddling people and/or goods around and between villages. In addition, brick factories provide seasonal work, as does agricultural labouring.

In Bangladesh, migration has a long history (Siddiqui, 2003), but it is now also part of the livelihood strategies that have arisen from changes in the countryside and includes commuting into district towns, and both seasonal and longer-term migration (Toufique, 2002: 23, 24). In Madhupur, with the exception of international migration, which is not very common, almost all other types of migration exist. According to my findings, most migrants are young and include both girls and boys.

Associated with the decline in the importance of family-based farming is the erosion in the traditional productive roles of both men and women (Kabeer, 2001). However, as Naila Kabeer (2001: 60) writes, norms of *purdah* (female seclusion) have made it difficult for women to follow men into the wider cash economy in search of alternative employment. She writes,

The economic devaluation of women which accompanied the transition of the economy from its predominantly subsistence-oriented agricultural base to a more diversified monetised one probably accounts for one of the key changes in gender relations in the course of this century: the shift in the direction of marriage payments from earlier practices which favoured the bride and her family (*pon*) to the new practice of *daabi* or 'demand' dowry which favours the groom and his family (Kabeer, 2001: 60).

Therefore, in addition to transformations in land ownership and increasingly diversified livelihoods, some of which necessitate migration, dowry is a 'new' tradition that has also had an impact on children's migration for work.

### *The 'New' Tradition of Dowry*

The relatively recent tradition of dowry has economic and political roots that date from the end of the nineteenth century (Lindenbaum, 1981; Kotalová, 1996). Although the practice of dowry first emerged among wealthy urban families, it became commonplace from the 1970s (Amin *et al.*, 2006; Rozario, 2002) and the practice has since spread to all sectors of the population, including the poorest rural households (Lindenbaum, 1981; Kabeer, 2001: 61).

The price of dowry continues to increase (Amin *et al.*, 2006; Sultana, 2005: 183), including in Madhupur and amounts demanded typically reflect girls' value in the marriage market (Amin *et al.*, 2006: 11), generally rising with increasing age and the educational attainment of girls (Sultana, 2005: 183). Although it is illegal according to the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1980 (Sultana, 2005: 181), it is widely practised and largely remains unchallenged (Rozario, 2002).

The forms of payment and amounts vary by region (Lindenbaum, 1981; Amin *et al.*, 2002). In Madhupur, dowry is paid usually in the form of cash and, as is the case in other parts of the country (Sultana, 2005: 184), it is not uncommon for parents to pay a portion of the dowry on marriage, with the intention of paying the balance later. However, until the amount is paid in full, there is always a risk that the girl will be sent back.

People employ a variety of strategies to meet dowry obligations: they sell or mortgage land, take loans and migrate for work (Sultana, 2005: 184) and amongst the poorest, it leads to a "severe erosion" of their assets (Sultana, 2005: 185). This is certainly the case in Madhupur. Thus the need for dowry is a significant reason for girls' migration for work, especially among households with little or no land and/or many daughters. As Zafrin, a girl who works in garments, explained to me, "*Dowry is society's rule*" and to earn and save for her dowry was the main reason why she migrated for work.

Such extra-household factors, including dowry, can therefore have major implications at the household level and children tend to migrate from those households that are most affected by the pressures created by continuing social and economic change.

### *Household 'vulnerability'*

It has been suggested that the rise of dowry has contributed to the increased incidence of divorce, separation and abandonment, especially among the poorer sections of society where social sanctions against such practices are weakest (Kabeer, 2001: 61). According to national data, 15 to 17 percent of rural households are female-headed, and this figure increases to 25 per cent among the landless (Kabeer, 2001: 61-62). According to my findings, households headed by females - usually as a result of the remarriage of, divorce by, or death of husbands – are the most acutely affected by such changes and female-headed households often have child labour migrants.

For example, Sahara was young when her father remarried, left the household and stopped supporting her and her siblings and their mother. Not long after he left, Sahara and an older sister migrated for domestic work. Talking of Sahara, her mother explained, “*She was very small, but we were very poor. My husband had just left...*” In addition to female-headed households, however, social position and class also mediate ‘choice’ in migration for work.

### *Social Position and 'Class' as Mediating Factors*

In my field-sites, most people describe themselves as *gorib lok* ('poor people') yet all households have a socio-economic status in the community and one's 'class' sets the 'acceptable' actions and behaviours of its members.

Being of a certain 'class' yields respect and authority in the community and when that authority has diminished, it brings with it embarrassment and shame. Class relates to a number of factors, including land ownership. For example, Nazma is married into a family that, in the past, used to own a lot of land. She told me that her two sons are embarrassed to go to the bazaar to buy rice because it shows they now have no land. Yet, although Nazma's husband has had to sell and mortgage their land, the large compound she lives in is made of bricks, not mud or bamboo like most of the other houses. Class is also related to family descent, and Nazma belongs to a household that still has status and position in the community.

Class interacts with gender, however, to constrain the full range of socially acceptable choices and actions available to girls and boys who are of a higher class; it may also serve to narrow one's thinking and mindset. However, a child who does not belong to a

household with either land or money may still be able to present herself as 'middle class' through association, by having friends who are. For example:

*I spent a day with Shukhi at her house. She is 14½ years-old and is no longer attending school, but rather does household work in her own home and waits for marriage offers. Her parents do not own any land (just their small house and the land underneath). Her father earns money doing agricultural work on others' land and he owns a bicycle which he uses for transportation. The day I was there Shukhi's father was doing weeding work in another village. In the morning, at her home, she was joined by two girlfriends, Rezi and Nafisa. I had previously visited Rezi at her family's large house which is situated in a big extended family compound. Nafisa must also be from a relatively well-off family because she is attending a semi-government school (as opposed to a madrassah which is much less expensive) and has progressed at a high level in her studies. I asked all three girls if any of them have any earning sources and all said "No." I asked if they would like paid work and all three said they would. I asked if it is possible to work and Rezi told me that in the village there is no work. I asked if, in that case, they would consider going outside the village to work and she said if there was work to do that she liked she would consider it, but that she has never thought about it before. I told her that I know some girls who do household work and garments work. Shukhi said, "We don't think of that kind of work." The other girls nodded their heads in agreement with Shukhi. I asked "Why not?" Rezi replied, "Our household is not in such a low status, we are middle class," and Shukhi nodded her head in agreement.*

Although Shukhi is not from a household of the same status and position as her two friends and would, on the face of it, seem a likely candidate for migrating for work, she has adopted their higher-class mannerisms and mindsets. Therefore, the thought of migrating for work has never entered her mind. 'Class' is therefore also a key principle that shapes choice and decision-making, including about migration for work, and related norms and behaviours are reflected in children's thinking, choices and decisions.

Household vulnerability, social position and class are therefore all important factors that shape – at the community level – which households have children who are more likely to

migrate for work. However, intra-household factors and processes are also central to understanding which children within households choose to migrate for work.

### **Intra-Household Dynamics: Household Composition, Birth Order and Sibling Composition**

Within the household, the factors that shape 'choice' and decision-making are the interlocking dimensions of household composition, birth order, and sibling composition (Antoniou, 2007: 13; Punch, 2001), since it is these that determine the choices and opportunities girls and boys have available to them and the decisions they make. These factors also shape and affect their roles and responsibilities within and to the household.

Many girls told me that they migrated for work because they do not have older brothers. Not having an older brother creates a problem for households, and especially older sisters, because it puts pressure on girls to support the household, which forces them to challenge hierarchical gendered and generational norms in society. For example, to my question, "*Why are you working here?*", many of the girls I met who had migrated for work explained it was because they did not have an older brother. Zafrin told me that if she had had an older brother, she would be living in the village and would have had a very different life. Beauty is the eldest girl of four children and the only child in her family to have worked outside. I asked her why her two younger brothers never worked outside and she explained that they were very young at the time she left for work and "*No older brother [means] it's a sister's responsibility.*" However, in addition to the need to understand which girls and boys leave their households, it is also important to know when.

#### *The domestic lifecycle of the household*

The composition of households is not static: cyclical changes in size and composition are brought about by births, marriages and the deaths of family members and these affect its means of subsistence (Aziz, 1979: 46). Roles and responsibilities of members are therefore dynamic and vary according to the domestic cycle of the household and the individual life cycle. Variations in these affect household members' responsibilities to each other, and subsequent choices and decisions.

Evidence shows that children's choices and decisions adapt to shifts within the household that affect household resources. For example, Beauty told me that her family used to be very poor, so as the eldest child she left the household to work. She explained

that the decision to do domestic work in Dhaka was hers and her parents' and that it was she who thought about going as "*we needed money and I wanted to help, to help to buy land.*" Beauty's family was subsequently able to buy land because of her contribution. All the income earned (by herself, her father and later by her brothers) was pooled together. Now that her family owns land and the household is more secure, the roles and responsibilities of each of the children have shifted. For example, Nargis, Beauty's younger sister, has no interest or compelling reason to work outside, and neighbours explain Nargis does not work outside because she is 'rich.' This is a profound contrast to Beauty's experience of the same household, yet many years earlier when they were 'poor.'

Roles and responsibilities of parents are also influenced by the domestic cycle of the household. For example, Eliza, a mother, told me that she would prefer to be working again as a cook in a private household in Dhaka (where she worked when her children were much younger and soon after her husband died) but she told me she cannot do that work now because her daughters have reached *biyer boyosh* ('marriage age').

'Marriage age' is associated with girls reaching puberty and this is seen as a vulnerable phase of life where girls' actions are under greater scrutiny in order to guard against consequences that may adversely affect their marriage chances and affect the amount of dowry. The change in girls' clothing style from dress or trousers to the more conservative *salwar kameez* (a long tunic worn over baggy trousers and with a long scarf covering the chest area) is an obvious external marker of this transition. In addition, girls' mobility becomes more restricted and they are discouraged from mixing with same or similar-aged boys and young men. Reaching this threshold is biological, but it is also socially determined by others, including neighbours and villagers, parents and relatives, and employers of girls who do domestic work. 'Marriage age' is often associated with girls stopping outside work. For example, Taslima returned home from domestic work in Dhaka because, according to her mother, "*...she is of marriage age so it is not good for her to be outside.*" Her employers also no longer wanted her working with them when she reached this stage.

For boys, 'marriage age' is much later than for girls (Rozario, 2002: 123), and they do not share the same physical and social boundaries as do girls at this particular stage of life. While their lives are not restricted in the same ways as girls, as my data reveal, they also have limits to 'choice'. In fact, the emphasis on not getting married is acute at this

stage of boys' lives, and several mothers explained that while they had no problem with their sons migrating for work, they were worried that their boys might meet and get involved with girls in the city. Although mothers go to some effort to try to keep their sons from getting married, the consequences are treated more light-heartedly for boys than for girls. The process of migration is therefore gendered, and migrant girls and their parents engage in more careful consideration of the timing of when girls migrate and return than do migrant boys and their parents.

Parents' age and health status (through aging, sickness or injury) also impacts the range of decisions and choices made about children and those made by children. Sohel, for example, informed me that because of an accident he had many years ago, he cannot support his household and cannot afford dowry for his two daughters. Moreover, because he has no older son, who would presumably otherwise be working, the girls have to work, and they are employed in a garment factory outside Dhaka. As he explained, *"I used to work but now I cannot that is why my daughters work. Does anyone go to the city willingly?"*

While men may be the symbolic head of the household, there are a number of reasons why this conceptualisation should be questioned in practice. In Bangladesh, the age difference between wives and their husbands remains significant (Amin *et al.*, 2006: 5) and in Madhupur, this is also the case. It is therefore very common to see widows and married women with elderly and infirm husbands who are physically unable to engage in paid work and who cannot financially support the running of the household. A disproportionate number of children from these households, especially if there are many daughters, have migrated for work.

### **Children's Narrow Scope for Agency**

Thus far, children's scope for 'choice' and 'decision-making' appears highly structured and constrained by the combination of extra- and intra-household factors. Samantha Punch (2002) writes how children strive for independence while also considering household needs and responsibility (Punch, 2002: 125). While my findings also show household aspirations and needs comprise a significant part of most children's reasons for 'choosing' to migrate, it is not the case for all and a number of girls and boys also have personal reasons and aspirations for migrating. These may include including anger directed at a parent or step-parent for being rebuked or for not acknowledging the child's contributions

to the household; to fulfil ambitions for a better life that cannot be realised by remaining in the village (for example, working to save for a dowry); boredom and a search for adventure; on a whim given favourable and necessary circumstances (such as having someone trustworthy to migrate with); and a wish to be with friends.

Girls and boys also migrated because they disliked the locally available work. For example, Saira told me that she came to the city *“to earn money, to help my parents and to have a good life”*. I asked if there was no work in the village that she would have considered doing. She said there was, but *“it is wage work, agricultural work. I don’t like lots of sun.”* Similarly, Minhaz told me he did not like the locally available work and said *“if people have big wishes and dreams then they have to go outside for work.”*

Yet privileging personal aspirations over household obligations can have adverse consequences if parents impose unrealistic demands on their children. For example, Zahangir first left home for work because of his desire to continue schooling (which was not possible if he remained at home), his wish for better quality and quantities of food, and his wish to live separately from his parents, for whom he had little respect. I asked him how he felt about having done domestic work (his first ‘outside’ job) and whether or not he had any regrets about doing it. He spoke quickly and with bitterness:

*Happy or unhappy, that is not the subject. [For] food, that is why I worked. You have seen [the condition of] my house. At Eid [the end of Ramadan] my mother cried because I didn’t give them money. I don’t get a salary [at my current job]. So, how can I give? And, then another time I went home I didn’t get food so then I never went back.*

Girls and boys also interact with the ‘household’ in ways that reveal agency through individual initiative and strategising. For example, Nargis is now 19 years-old. She describes herself as ‘middle class’ and she is from a relatively better-off household than her female friends. Her thinking and subsequent choices and decisions were affected by several of her female friends who, at the time that Nargis was in school, were engaged in domestic work in other towns and cities. Given that opportunities for girls to engage in paid work are limited and are mostly associated with poor girls, the fact that Nargis even wanted to work distinguishes her from many of her peers, and shows personal attributes as important aspects of agency. However, her interest in earning money did not mean she

would engage in *any* type of work - for example, domestic work which is considered by many to be the lowest status of female work (Blanchet, 1996: 103). Despite her parents' opposition, Nargis managed to negotiate with her parents to allow her to work and she did, finding employment in a chip factory nearby.

#### *Manipulating liminality: ektu vs. besi*

My findings also show that being part of a 'household' and reaching a particular threshold such as 'marriage age' does not necessarily impede agency nor the negotiation and exercise of power.

Girls and their families devise ways of extending the period of girls' unmarried adolescence to make socially possible their migration for work. For example, I met a few girls, many of whom were *biyer boyosh* and who nevertheless were working. I asked them how that was possible, and was told that before they were only a little bit (*ektu*) into marriage age, and not too much (*besi* or *boro*), so it was still possible to work. I was intrigued by the creativity and flexibility of a threshold which had previously appeared so firmly bounded yet that could be contested and negotiated, making it socially acceptable for girls to return to cities for work.

By returning to the city within this period of *ektu*, the girls and their families are seen to be adhering to the social norms that structure girls' lives, yet they are also discretely contesting and negotiating with them. Therefore, although the timing of migration appears fixed, girls and their parents do engage with the structures, contesting and bending the 'boundaries' to serve household and/or individual needs and aspirations. Household members therefore cooperate with each other to subvert biological and social processes.

Yet, agency is not only about opposing structures, it is also about making decisions and creating a life for oneself that does not necessarily have to be in opposition to the prevailing norms. Agency is also evident in accepting and adhering to social norms and practices. For example, although Ruma chose to defy her parents to go back to work even though she was 'marriage age,' she told me that other girls comply and return home because "*it isn't their wish to work and they want to get married.*" Ruma told me she wanted a different life from those types of girls and wanted to be independent. Girls like Ruma who 'chose' to remain working, or who went back to work, see it as offering a

different life and future, and manipulating liminality is a means of making it more socially acceptable.

## **Conclusions**

These findings raise questions about the prevailing image that poor people are powerless and that children, in particular, have no 'choice' and are forced to leave their household because of poverty and their young age. Extra- and intra-household factors shape choice and decision-making in girls' and boys' migration for work. They determine which households are more likely to have child labour migrants and, from within households, which children are more likely to leave. Children migrate for work at specific gendered thresholds in their lives: timing is central to understand when they migrate. Yet despite having limited scope to exercise individual agency and power, child migrants do have means and ways of bending and manipulating the structuring principles of gender, generation and class to serve their needs and/or aspirations.

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