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Masculinities, Femininities and Gender Relations in Contemporary  
Bangladesh: An Analysis of the Construction Sector in Sylhet

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## Glossary

All of the Bangla words used in this thesis are translated in the main text. However I collate here the most used words for the convenience of the readers. All translations are mine. In Bangla language there is a tendency to use the singular to refer to both singular and plural. For example, *sarder* in Bangla can mean *sarder* (singular) or *sardars* (plural). In the text I have Anglicised *sarder*, *jogali* and *rajmistri* by adding an 's' to render them plural in appropriate contexts.

*Baba*: father

*Beta jogali*: male construction sector helper(s)

*Beta rajmistri*: male head construction worker(s)

*Beti jogali*: female construction sector helper(s)

*Beti rajmistri*: female head construction worker(s)

*Bhai*: brother

*Bhavi*: brother's wife

*Bidi*: cheap cigarette

*Burqah*: veil

*Chacha*: father's brother

*Dulabhai*: elder sister's husband

*Gamcha*: very thin cotton towel

*Izzat*: honour

*Jogali*: construction sector helper(s), both man and woman are called *jogali*

*Kodai*: bowl

*Konni*: sharp metal instrument used in construction work

*Lungi*: Bangladeshi male attire, which is worn instead of trousers

*Mama*: mother's brother

*Nani*: maternal grandmother

*Orna*: long thin scarf

*Pan*: One kind of green leaf chewed with betel nuts and other local tobaccos

*Purdah*: seclusion

*Rajmistri*: head construction worker(s)

*Salwar Kameez*: approximately knee length loose fitting shirt and trouser

*Saree*: women ware in Bangladesh

*Shada pata*: one kind of tobacco chewed with betel nuts and leaves

*Supari*: betel nut

*Taka (Tk)*: Bangladeshi currency

*Zarda*: one kind of tobacco chewed with betel nuts and leaves



## **Explanation of the preface images**

These pictures were taken during the course of my ethnographic fieldwork with the construction workers in Sylhet, Bangladesh. All those depicted here are participants and narrators in this study and have given permission to use these images. These images depict a typical day in the life of female construction workers, covering: the early morning congregating points; the hard labour they perform, and; the social spaces they create during break time with their co-workers.

## **Chapter I: Introduction**

Bangladesh is seen as a ‘classic patriarchal society’ (Kandiyoti 1988) by many scholars, where women and men are entrusted with different sets of role-responsibilities. Under patriarchal kinship systems such as those in Bangladesh, the private sphere is commonly designated as female, while the public sphere is considered predominantly as male space. As such, men in this society are deemed to be the providers for their dependants; women, on the other hand, are dependent on men for their survival (Kandiyoti 1988; Kabeer 1991; Salway et al. 2003). More recent studies have however revealed that these conventional role-relations in Bangladeshi society are going through transformations. Growing impoverishment in rural areas, declining ability of men to meet the household expenses with single incomes, increasing numbers of female workers in the labour force, and rising numbers of female headed households are the key reasons contributing to the changes (White 1992; Feldman 2001).

Like many other societies, Bangladeshi society also seems to maintain that men’s providing role is at the heart of the construction of their masculine identities. Men’s provisioning role accords them the power base to exercise control and authority over their wives and children. From the capacity of being the provider and household head, a man usually establishes absolute control over his wife’s life. In this way, her mobility, access to and control over the productive resources, life choices, ability and/or desire to make important decisions about personal and familial issues and so on are likely to be controlled by him (Chen 1986; Cain et al. 1979; Kabeer 1997; Salway et al. 2003; Salway et al. 2005). In recent decades Bangladesh has been experiencing under and unemployment in particular among men (Feldman 2001) which has rendered many of them less able to provide for their family members (Chen 1986). Concurrently women’s participation in income earning activities is expanding to a significant extent in response to the changing socioeconomic scenario. Even three decades ago women’s participation in waged employment outside the home and mobility in the public domain, however, were constrained by the cultural norms of Bangladeshi society. As such, women’s increasing participation in economic activities outside the home in more recent decades and the concomitant decline in men’s breadwinning role is thought to have had a transformative role in the construction of masculinity, femininity and gender relations in

contemporary Bangladeshi society. My specific intent in this study is to investigate the lived experience of both men and women involved in the construction sector in Bangladesh in an effort to understand masculinities, femininities and changing gender relations in the contemporary society. This introductory chapter begins with an overview of Bangladesh and in subsequent sections I introduce my thesis highlighting the rationale and objectives of the research. I conclude the chapter with an outline of the thesis.

### **Introducing Bangladesh**

Bangladesh is a South Asian country with a population of almost 160 million which marks it as one of the most densely populated countries in the world. Furthermore, it is also one of the poorest countries where nearly 40% of the total population lives in extreme poverty and among this poorest 40% the position of women is further marginalised (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics henceforth, BBS 2009). The country has an agrarian economy and agriculture accommodates the majority of the rural labour force (BBS 2009). However, the share of agriculture to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has been decreasing in recent years (BBS 2009) mainly due to the increasing population of the country which is causing scarcity of cultivable land, in turn adversely contributing to reduced agricultural production (Kabeer and Mahmud 2004).

Despite the meagre state of the agricultural sector, Bangladesh has been achieving a steady growth rate of 5 to 6% since the 1990s (World Bank Report 2008) and has managed to reduce poverty in a significant way in efforts towards achieving the targets of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). Most recent available statistics indicate that Bangladesh has been doing well in terms of basic social development indicators, for example, primary school attendance is approximately 85%; 56% people have access to improved sanitation; total fertility rates (TFR 2.2), infant mortality rates (37 per 1,000 live births) and maternal mortality rates (194 deaths per 100,000 live births) have gone down. In terms of social indicators Bangladesh has overtaken its neighbour India, although economically India is far more developed than Bangladesh and has a per capita income of \$3,203 which is almost double that of Bangladesh (The World Bank 2013; Dreze and Sen 2013). Life expectancy of women in Bangladesh, which until recently

was lower than men, has increased; recent statistics show life expectancy at birth for men and women is 67.9 and 70.3 years respectively (see BBS 1996 and 2011). These are all positive indicators of social development no doubt; however, there remain many gaps to fill in to ensure the overall well-being of women in Bangladesh. Dreze and Sen (2013) also commented that the achievements Bangladesh has made in the field of social development and women's well-being lack transparency and as such deserve closer inspection. Banks et al. (2011) argue that the available statistics regarding a 'steady decline' of poverty in the context of Bangladesh is grossly flawed and they further claim to observe a rising trend in the numbers of absolute poor in the country. Similarly, in terms of achieving gender equality Bangladesh has still long way to go. Within the total population, men constitute 78 million whilst only 74 million are female (BBS 2009) which reflects a male biased sex ratio i.e. 'abnormally' fewer females than males (100:106). Generally, an adverse female-to-male ratio demonstrates the effects of discrimination against women (Momsen 2010). Although sex selective abortion is not believed to be widespread in Bangladesh unlike several of its neighbouring South Asian countries (e.g., India), the fact remains that the sex ratio is masculine. South Asia is termed by many scholars (e.g., Kandiyoti 1988; Caldwell 1978) as a region of 'extreme patriarchy'. Bangladesh as a South Asian country shares many commonalities with its neighbours in terms of extreme patriarchal practices where discrimination against women is ingrained in the customs of society.

It is, however, important to note that women in Bangladesh are by no means a homogeneous group. Rather they are dissimilar by religion, education, class, culture, location and so forth. Mohanty (1997) challenges the image of the 'average Third World women' as 'ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimised' and so on, allegedly produced by some feminists and development literature. According to her, all women in the 'Third World' are not equally 'powerless', 'exploited' and 'sexually harassed' (Mohanty 1997:80-81). Similarly, I argue that the women of Bangladesh do not experience patriarchal oppressive practices in a uniform way. Women's experiences vary with their class, education, location, and cultural setting. Since women situated in different positions experience patriarchal oppressions differently, their responses to patriarchal practices also vary widely.

**Introducing the thesis**

Many women in Bangladeshi society do seem not to challenge patriarchy explicitly, rather they continue to believe in existing gender ideology that sustains women's inferior status under the subjugation of men. Nevertheless, studies have documented how men's and women's changing role-relations both inside and outside the home in contemporary Bangladeshi society certainly have some implications for gender relations and are likely to challenge dominant notions of masculinity and femininity. Existing studies reveal that the cultural climate of Bangladesh is not in favour of female autonomy; nevertheless a vast majority of poor women are pushed into the labour market to earn a living for themselves and their family. Women located in the poorer strata of the society, for instance, the female construction workers, have transcended the cultural norms of the society and people's perceptions in many ways through their actions. This complex process of transformation, however, has not had appropriate attention in Bangladesh. Studies conducted in India, on the other hand, have placed important emphasis on the poorer women of different caste backgrounds involved in various low return economic activities, for example, agricultural work, brick making and gem-cutting (Kapadia 1992; 1993; 1995 and 1997; Harriss-White 2003; Guerin et al. 2007; Guerin 2013; Shah 2006; Breman 2010). Research conducted on women's employment in urban Bangladesh has predominantly shed light on female factory workers (Amin et al. 1997; Feldman 1992; Kabeer 1997 and 2000; Kibria 1995; Zaman 2001; Khosla 2009; Rahman 2010). Poorer women and their experiences within the home and the workplace did not receive much attention in such studies (Salway et al. 2003). An extensive survey of literature has not revealed the existence of any study that has investigated the situation of the female construction workers, their negotiation with the patriarchal system to join the labour force, their double or triple workload, and gender relations within and outside the family in the context of Bangladesh.

Hence I wished to bridge this missing link and in my Master's dissertation in Women's and Gender Studies I embarked on ethnographic research with female construction workers in Bangladesh. When I conducted research with female construction workers in 2010, in Sylhet, Bangladesh, my intensive but brief stay in the field enabled me to access a very rich source of ethnographic data. Consequently, I realised that I would be able to explore more about the different dimensions of female construction workers'

lived experiences if I undertook further study with this group, with a broader approach. My previous study on female construction workers formed the basis of my present relatively extensive ethnographic research project. The following section will elaborate the questions I intend to address in-depth in this study.

### **Research questions and objectives**

The existing literature, as I discuss in Chapter II, reflects the disadvantageous position of Bangladeshi women in society. Although there are different laws in the country to provide a legal framework for women's rights, in reality women can rarely take advantage of the laws formulated in their favour. The whole socialisation process of Bangladeshi women contributes to their internalisation of their marginal status in all aspects of their lives. Women are secluded by the norms of *purdah* which effectively reduces their ability to establish control over material resources and also helps to perpetuate their subordinate status within both the family and workplace. Because of the existing social and cultural patterns women in Bangladesh experience varying circumstances in which they can claim their legitimate share both in terms of the household and wider society.

Under such circumstances how do women negotiate patriarchy to join the labour force? How do men feel when women of their households engage in paid employment outside the home? What impact might this have on their masculine identity? What is the impact on divisions of labour in the household? Do men share the domestic workload with women, or does paid work simply add to women's overall workload? Does paid work increase women's 'voice' in familial decision making processes? Do men and women experience changes in gender relations? Does the opening of new avenues (migration, paid employment) have any impact on gender relations? Does paid employment work as a mechanism to improve their bargaining ability inside the home? How do the women of the poorest strata experience the outside world? How do husbands and male co-workers view women's paid work? What are the implications of their paid work on their family and personal life? Do women become more mobile when they join the labour force? How do they negotiate the *purdah* system? These are the core questions I will pursue in my study in order to have an understanding of the negotiation process of

women in entering into paid work, and whether their engagement makes any change in existing patriarchal values and hierarchical gender relations both inside and outside the home.

The broad objective of the study is to understand specifically located masculinities and femininities in the context of Bangladesh and to assess whether there are any changes experienced by the female construction workers within the family and workplace in relation to gender. This broad objective has been split into several specific objectives. These specific objectives are:

1. to understand the family structure of female construction workers in terms of family size, family type, head of the household, number of earning members, family income, number of children;
2. to explore the ways in which female construction workers negotiated with patriarchal norms to join the workforce;
3. to investigate whether the women engaged in paid work outside the home are redefining the notion of masculinity and femininity;
4. to explore the participants' experiences as workers (for example, in terms of discrimination on the basis of gender, attitude of male co-workers, and sexual harassment);
5. to examine whether women's access to income-earning opportunities have any implications for gender relations within the household specifically in terms of divisions of labour and decision making, and;
6. lastly, to examine whether the large number of women participating in construction work has had an impact on the erosion or recomposition of patriarchal values and norms.

In terms of structuring the thesis, I am guided by the necessity to focus on female construction workers' lived experience in Bangladeshi society. It is very difficult to neatly organise the key themes into separate chapters as they are interrelated and, thus, persistently overlap. However, this is both an inevitable as well as essential aspect of the

intersectional nature of both gender and ethnographic studies. The thesis has nine chapters. Chapter I starts with a discussion of existing gender relations in Bangladeshi society followed by a brief introduction to the country, Bangladesh, where I conducted the research and concludes with the brief overview of the thesis.

Chapter II is devoted to discussing women's situation in Bangladeshi society and the gender relations both men and women experience inside and outside the home. The chapter focuses on a wide range of issues concerning women's status in Bangladeshi society ranging from women's legal status to their situation in the marital home. The chapter also highlights women's migration to a new social environment and its impact on their status and the gender relations they experience. In an effort to portray a wider picture of the challenges and prospects experienced by Bangladeshi female construction workers, I draw on scholarly literature produced both in the context of Bangladesh and other parts of the world. The chapter continues discussing the implications of women's paid employment and changing role-relations both inside and outside the home.

Chapter III is dedicated to discussing the methodological frameworks employed in this research. I elaborate the reasons behind selecting Sylhet city as the research site, the reasons that guided the recruitment procedure of both male and female participants, and the rationale behind using the data collection techniques used in this research to generate the necessary data. I discuss my experience of researching female and male participants in the context of Bangladesh. The chapter also addresses the ethical concerns that require special attention in every social research.

Chapter IV depicts the vignettes of 10 of my participants; both male and female participants' experiences are described here in greater detail to give an idea about the life experiences of the participants.

Chapter V discusses masculinities in the context of Bangladeshi society. Based on life history interviews of female construction workers and in-depth interviews with their husbands and male co-workers, this chapter examines the construction of masculinity and femininity both in the household and workplace occupied by the participants. In Bangladeshi society a man is believed to be the provider for his family members and a woman is considered to be the one who tends to rely on the patriarchal bargain. Here I



debunk this long-established myth and argue that these conventional role-relations are changing in Bangladeshi society as a result of a decline in male incomes. I argue that a large number of men now depend on their wives for survival and demonstrate that a man's inability to conform to the norms of what is perceived to be a 'real man' tends to create a dent in his privileged position in the home. This indicates transformations in gender relations leading men to renegotiate their masculine identity, at least to some extent, in the domestic sphere.

In chapter VI I analyse women's experiences as workers in the heavily male dominated construction sector. In this chapter I also explore men's perceptions regarding women's paid employment in the public realm to obtain a wider picture of women's workplace experiences. Here I analyse women's experience of being exploited, discriminated against, deprived and cheated on the basis of their gender. I also pay special attention to examining sexual harassment faced by female construction workers while working in a heavily male dominated field.

Chapter VII considers female construction workers' perceptions and experiences concerning intra-household gender relations. I demonstrate how female construction workers' involvement in waged work enables them to renegotiate patriarchal values, pose a challenge to hierarchical marital power relations and enhance their position within the household, albeit to a limited extent.

In Chapter VIII I demonstrate how women perceive their roles both as construction workers and important providers for their respective households. I also explore the challenges women face both in the workplace and home as 'working women' in a patriarchal social context. Here I argue that paid employment outside the home has accorded women a greater self-confidence, mobility and awareness of their ability to communicate with the wider society and to manoeuvre situations to improve their own well-being.

Chapter IX is the concluding chapter of this thesis, which summarises the main arguments I make throughout the thesis. I demonstrate that applying an ethnographic approach to the understanding of masculinities, femininities and gender relations enables me to present simultaneously a broader and more nuanced picture. Throughout

the thesis I argue that although patriarchal social structures and existing gender relations act as oppressive forces in Bangladeshi society, they are neither homogeneous nor unchangeable. I conclude with the note that in a changing socioeconomic context, masculinities, femininities and gender relations are also going through negotiations and transformations.

## **Chapter II: Gender relations within and beyond the household and women's status in Bangladeshi society**

### **Women in the context of Bangladesh**

In Bangladeshi society boys are considered as the assets to the family since they are believed to take further the lineage of their fathers. Girls, on the other hand, are viewed as only temporary members of their parents' family (Jahan 1975). It is assumed that girls will be married and become the members of their husbands' lineage which is the dominant marriage practice of the patriarchal social system. Although the overwhelming majority of the Bangladeshi population is Muslim and the practice of dowry demand was not embedded in Bangladeshi Muslim customs, in recent decades dowry has emerged as an unavoidable major social practice (Ali 2002; Monsoor 2008). Many people perceive dowry as a way of making money (Akanda and Shamim 1985). This is particularly so, as under and unemployment is widespread among young males in Bangladesh. Well-to-do parents, on the contrary, spend lavishly on their children's wedding to show off their wealth. It seems that they believe the huge payment of dowry reflects positively on their status (see Gardner 1995a; Mannan 2003). Though these people are relatively few in number, the impact of their conduct is far-reaching.

In Bangladeshi society, boys and girls often receive differential treatment from birth onwards (Chowdhury 2000). From childhood a Bangladeshi girl is trained to become a docile, devoted, altruistic, patient and faithful wife and mother, deemed the 'perfect woman' (Chowdhury 2000; Ghatak 2006). Since her childhood a girl's marriage receives utmost importance from her parents. Even a daughter's education is also directed largely with the intention of finding a suitable husband (Khan 1993 cited in Akmam 2004), while raising her earning ability, boosting her self-reliance and making her competent for a prestigious position in society customarily tends to be given less importance. In a patriarchal society investing in a girl's future is perceived somewhat a poor investment by many (Ameen 2005) as after getting married a daughter will go to her husband's house and most likely she will be less available to extend support to her parents in their old age or in difficult times (Jha et al. 1998; Ahmed 1991). Consequently, parents are less motivated to regard a daughter's future as a worthwhile long-term investment. However, at present a change has been observed in this regard as

middle and upper-class parents are taking more interest in educating their daughters vis-à-vis sons (Chowdhury 2009). Social norms, nevertheless, continue to perceive marriage as women's main 'career' over any professional career they may pursue. This distinctive thought pattern towards girls' futures and the subsequent gendered socialisation of girls in a patriarchal society, seems to determine their position both at the familial and societal levels.

### **Constructions of masculinities and femininities in the context of Bangladesh**

Masculinity in general and hegemonic masculinity in particular has occupied an important place in social sciences literature mainly through Connell's (1987) work. Since then many scholars have focused on masculinity and 'conceptualised it in many ways'; nevertheless, still there is little 'consensus' about the definition of masculinity (Hearn and Morrell 2012:4). It has been argued that the ideas of masculinities and femininities are in constant flux and the perceptions regarding these concepts vary based on age, class, culture, ethnicity, timeframe and so on and so forth. Although globally the concept of masculinity has managed to draw immense attention as well as criticism among scholars, there has not been a great deal of work published in this field pertaining specifically to constructions and experiences of masculinities in Bangladesh. There is, nevertheless, a growing body of literature that has begun to touch on this field, most notably, for example is the work of Gardner (2002a and 2002b), Ahmed (2008) and Hossain (2013). I have focused on masculinity and femininity in the context of Bangladesh in Chapter V; here I am going to articulate the constructions of masculinities and femininities among a particular sector of people who are located in a poorer stratum of Bangladeshi society in terms of their economic, educational and cultural capital. In terms of indigeneity this is not an indices of difference of identity position because these men and women under study are perceived as Bangladeshi in general, not as people of a particular indigenous or ethnic background. However, I am not claiming to portray a comprehensive picture of masculinities and femininities involving different forms of masculinity and femininities existent in Bangladeshi society among different classes and generations. Like many other cultures, in my study I found that men's masculine identity is largely constructed through their ability to

provide for their dependants. All of my female participants believed their husbands' masculine identity rests upon their ability to emerge as adequate breadwinners for their family members and keep their wives in seclusion. It is not to say that other aspects of masculinity, for instance, marriage and fatherhood, do not seem to be relevant in the construction of masculinity in Bangladeshi society. Since my female participants rarely focused on those aspects, I assume they draw secondary attention, at least, among the poorer people who make up my participants. Male participants, who were able to provide for their family members and keep their wives from the labour market, were seen to proudly claim the absolute authority within the households as they believed they were able to obtain social recognition as 'men'. Conversely, men who were unable to fulfil their masculine responsibilities, were less inclined to talk about men's provisioning role as the central aspect of their identity. Men who were dependent on their wives for their livelihood overtly or covertly conveyed the message that they had control over their wives' decisions and this was how they tried to uphold their masculine identity. Men who shared the breadwinning role with their wives, to a large extent, were inclined to hide the reality about wives' waged work from friends and extended family members to protect their masculine image. Women were also seen to maintain secrecy about their paid employment outside the home to support their husbands' intention. All my married male participants proudly claimed that they had the ultimate say in their respective households. Unmarried male participants also held the desire to have the absolute authority over their wives' body and mind. However, among middle or upper-class Bangladeshi men it is not common to openly admit that their wives need to abide by their desires, even if they actually enforce strict control over their wives. Fear of implicit (or explicit) social disapproval and being perceived as 'unsophisticated' on a wider social spectrum restrain middle and upper-class men from public manifestation of masculinity at the cost of wife domination; this was not the case for the male participants of my study. Marital infidelity on the part of men was not considered as a grave offence by my female participants, rather they considered it as a male trait and both my male and female participants seemed to believe that faithfulness is only applicable to women. I found that my male participants also tried to defend their masculine identity by not doing things, at least in public, which are even remotely seen as 'female'. For instance, relatively better off male participants who were working as *rajmistris* (head construction workers) did not like to carry a lunch box to workplace as they found it feminine. A great majority of dependent men were reluctant to share

housework just to protect their masculine image; while some men whose wives were not involved in paid employment did not feel bad to share housework as they believed by being a successful provider of their dependants they already had fulfilled the condition of being 'men'. While studying British Sylhetis, Gardner (2002b:196) observed that men have greater access to 'sacred capital' than women; I argue that the prevailing cultural norms and practices of Bangladesh potentially confers men more access to socioeconomic and cultural capital in different ways that are directly linked to their 'maleness', or their 'masculine capital'(Vasquez de Aquila 2013:67).

Femininity, amongst my participants, was perceived as a contrast to masculinity. The majority of my participants believed that femininity is associated with altruistically performing all productive and reproductive tasks for the family, taking special care of husbands, incontestably accepting hierarchical gender power relations in the household and so on. Along conventional lines most of my female participants believed home is the right place for women, although they also seemed to consider earning a livelihood for the whole family, including the husband, was imperative on the part of a 'good wife'. A good number of my female participants expressed the conviction of continuing with paid employment, focused on the necessity of earning for themselves and their family and upheld their hard earned self-esteem. Some of them were seen to negotiate domestic power relations by posing direct or indirect challenges to their husbands and all of them implicitly, if not explicitly, wanted their husbands to shoulder some of the domestic chores. Some of my female participants were seen to help their dependent husbands to maintain their masculine image by not challenging their authority in the home; others were seen to protect their husbands' masculine image in public through buying them consumer goods such as a cell phone, though they themselves did not keep one. One of my female participants illustrated this behaviour saying "it does not look good if a woman of my class keeps a cell phone and walks on the street while talking on the phone. You can keep one since you work in an office. I have bought a cell phone for my husband as he had a long desire for one. You know these things look good in a man's hand". This comment demonstrates how women themselves differentiate between notions of femininity 'appropriate' for different classes. Some of my female participants did have their own cell phones. However, most of them did sound a bit apologetic, as if they transgressed the boundary of femininity by keeping a cell phone; but others explained the necessity of keeping one. As I have said, the constructions of

masculinities and femininities are constantly shifting over time: I found this to be the case among my female participants as their perceptions about what is acceptable for a woman is changing gradually and they appeared to be inclined towards greater equality with men.

This is my personal academic analysis of the constructions of masculinities and femininities in Bangladesh. As I stated, there is a dearth of published work in this field, therefore, here I present my own analysis.

### **Marriage: the ultimate destiny of women**

As mentioned before, in Bangladesh marriage as an institution has been given overwhelming importance and this is especially true for women (Jahan 1975; Chowdhury 2000). Marriages are generally arranged by the parents of the bride and groom (Gardner 2006 and 1995b), however, in recent times a large number of parents are welcoming their children's opinion in choosing their life partners. Virginity on the part of the bride is seen to be crucial upon marriage (Brydon and Chant 1989). In fact, in Bangladeshi society women's sexual propriety is imperative throughout their lives which places them under constant scrutiny and close familial and social control (Dube 1997; Siddiqi 2003a). Marriage in Bangladesh is the only legally and socially recognised means of managing the sexuality of women (and men) which is also one of the important reasons for marriage to receive such profound importance in Bangladeshi society (Jahan 1994).

As I already mentioned, in Bangladesh marriage is not an affair merely of the wife and the husband, rather it is an event between two families. The patrilineal, patrilocal joint<sup>1</sup> family system, where three generations live together, is the culturally valued living arrangement in Bangladesh (Brydon and Chant 1989). Because of the patrilocal residence system marriage for a woman means moving to her husband's house permanently, which is also associated with the departure from her natal home (Gardner 2006 and 2009a; Jesmin and Salway 2000). After marriage a newly-wed woman is

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<sup>1</sup> joint family means two or three generations living under the same roof and eating from the same pot. I have used 'joint living', 'joint family', 'extended family' and 'extended household' interchangeably.

expected to shape herself according to the wishes of her in-laws (Gardner 2006; Sikri 1999) and perform most of the housework without any complaint (Jha et al. 1998). A husband is entitled to absolute and incontrovertible control of his wife's sexuality, and even after marriage, as previously said, women are under surveillance and deemed in need of protection (Dube 1997). In case of unfaithfulness on the part of a woman, she is likely to pay a high price in terms of receiving physical punishment in public, social exclusion and/or desertion. On the contrary, loose behaviour of a man generally does not incur much concern among the immediate family and wider society; although within Islam male chastity is also supposedly as important as female chastity.

In their marital home, adult females, such as mother-in-law and sister(s)-in-law have clear control and authority over the new bride. In Bangladesh public demonstrations of love and affection between husband and wife tends to receive lesser social acceptance, which also practically makes husband a distant person to his wife (Jesmin and Salway 2000). For a woman the early years of marriage in particular require her to abide by *purdah* and limitations are imposed on her freedom of movement (Jahan 1975). The social ideal of husband as breadwinner and guardian, and wife as dependent and secluded, is central to the Bangladeshi marital contract (Kabeer 1991). The husband should be the head, the decision maker, and the breadwinner of the family (Ahmed 1991). The wife, on the other hand, should be submissive, self-effacing and a follower (Dube 1997).

As mentioned before, the vast majority of the population of Bangladesh is Muslim, hence different facets of people's life such as marriage, divorce, re-marriage, guardianship etc. are guided by Islamic law. Islam demands obedience on the part of a wife because a man pays for his wife in terms of dower (bride price) (Dube 1997). In Islam men are allowed to inflict physical punishment to discipline their non-compliant wives (Jahan 1994). Although it was not proclaimed in Islam that husbands can indiscriminately 'discipline' their wives using the religious directives, in practice, many husbands unjustly employ religious 'mandate' against their wives. A more recent study conducted in Bangladesh revealed that 89% men living in rural areas and 83% men living in urban areas perceive that they have the right to beat their wives (Hossain 2014). According to Akanda and Shamim (1985), women, particularly those located in extended households in rural areas, regularly face the threat of physical violence from



their husbands and occasionally from their husbands' kin. Although a married woman spends the rest of her life in her husband's house unless divorced, this does not entitle her to consider the house as her own. A wife, however, experiences a significant change in her situation with the anticipation of motherhood. For a Bangladeshi wife, giving birth to a child- especially a male child- is what ultimately fortifies her marital relationship (see Sikri 1999). The insecurity, doubt and shame wrought by infertility are dissipated by the birth of a child (Jha et al. 1998).

In Bangladesh monogamous marriage is the principal form, though polygamy is not unlawful. According to the law a husband must obtain the permission of his first wife in order to take a second wife. However, the husbands often resort to violence when wives do not abide by their intentions. Thus the issue of polygamy often leads to domestic violence and is a constant threat to women from all social classes in Bangladesh, but especially in poorer households due to greater financial and social constraints (Khan 1993). The fear of divorce/desertion which is associated with social stigma, alongside economic insecurity, precludes women to challenge their husbands' decisions (Jesmin and Salway 2000). Men often take advantage of women's weak fallback position and do not hesitate to exert force over them to realise their desires (Ali 2002).

### **Women and law**

The legal status of women in Bangladesh, like many other societies, is influenced predominantly by cultural practices rather than that which is proclaimed under Islamic law (Ahmed 1991). The Constitution of the country has guaranteed equal rights to all its citizens. Nevertheless, irrespective of their social and economic circumstances, the vast majority of women in Bangladesh suffer from some form of disadvantages in the enjoyment of their fundamental rights (Ali 2002). Under the Muslim Personal Law a woman is entitled to inherit property, but not on an equal footing to men. After her husband's death, a woman gets one-eighth of her husband's property. In case he dies childless, she gets one-fourth (Jahan 1975). A husband, on the other hand inherits one-fourth or half of his wife's property. A daughter is entitled to get half of the total property if there is no other brother or sister, and two-thirds among them if there are

sisters; and the rest will go to the male members of the extended family (Khan 1993). Clearly, gender differentiated inheritance rights favour men over women.

Furthermore, it is often found that women are deprived of property that they inherit or they consciously renounce their right because of the concerns involved in claiming it (Ahmed 1991). Women who assert their rights over their patrimony are generally looked down upon by their extended family and other relatives throughout Bangladesh (Hashmi 2000). The desire of women to maintain warm relationships with brothers often prevents them from claiming their legitimate share of patrimony (Akanda and Shamim 1985). Seclusion from the public sphere and lack of access to different modes of communication resulting from marrying outside their natal villages curbs women's capacity to retain control over their shares of patrimonial land. Given these difficulties involved in asserting their rights, a vast majority of women relinquish their rights in favour of their brothers, in a kind of bargain (Akanda and Shamim 1985; Kabeer 1985). Surrendering patrimony on the part of women in favour of their brothers renders their brothers responsible for continuous support and protection in times of crisis e.g., divorce, widowhood and desertion (Kabeer 1994).

As mentioned before, agriculture is the main basis of the Bangladeshi economy (BBS 2009), which makes land the most important asset. Despite this fact, more than 50% of people in Bangladesh are landless and the land ownership rate of women is extremely low. Ahmed (1991) found that women rarely own land, their assets for the most part include jewellery, which they receive as gifts from their parents and/or husbands during their marriage. Drawing on Westergaard (1983), Ahmed (1991) also illustrated how men sometimes dispose of their wives' assets (jewellery) to buy land and establish control over the land. Irrespective of their class positions and locations, Bangladeshi women are likely to experience poverty because of the male-biased nature of resource distribution within households (Kabeer 1994). It is no wonder that this characteristic resource allocation process has a strong likelihood of making a profound impact on the overall situation of women in Bangladesh.

**Social norms, women's work and men's perceptions**

Women in Bangladesh are primarily engaged in unpaid domestic work. They perform all domestic chores along with many other productive and community management tasks. Women's responsibilities in the households include: preparing, cooking and serving meals, washing clothes, cleaning the utensils and the house; collecting firewood, cow dung etc. for fuel, carrying water for household use from nearby ponds or tube-wells, taking care of children and elderly members of the family, and looking after the livestock and poultry; growing fruits and vegetables besides participation in post-harvest activities (Gardner 2006; Dixit 1998; Khan 1993; Hamid 1996; Begum and Shamim 1993; Kabeer 1988). In my study I found that in addition to their regular familial responsibilities women need to pay extra care to their husbands. This extra care involves serving hot food to one's husband when he gets home, washing his clothes, bringing him water from the neighbourhood tube-well for his personal use for which sometimes she must wait in a long queue, pressing his legs and massaging oil on his body and legs, give him cool air with a hand fan and so on. Like elsewhere, in Bangladeshi society also, women need to perform a great deal of community management activities. Momsen (2010:245) holds that 'women's survival strategies often depend on building networks of women within the community'. I found that the community management role of women is particularly important, though not exclusively, in the resource poor households. In Chapter VII, I will present examples through the narratives of my participants which illustrate the extent of women's reliance on each other for their day-to-day activities. In Chapter VIII, we will see how women act as 'embodied infrastructure' (Clisby and Holdsworth 2014:10) for other women and facilitate their migration to urban areas and entrance into the labour market; which is also one kind of community management task. However, the community management roles of women are rarely appreciated and acknowledged as 'work'. Although the above mentioned works carried out by women for their households, husbands and communities vary according to their class position and rural/urban context, the social norms customarily required women, irrespective of their position, to bear the full brunt of these responsibilities (Qayum and Ray 2010). Upper and middle-class women, however, can escape some if not all of these arduous tasks by hiring domestic helpers and using household gadgets whilst poorer women unable to either purchase household

gadgets or hire domestic helpers have little option but to undertake the numerous laborious tasks required by the households.

As mentioned before, in Bangladeshi society a separate sphere of men and women exists where women are supposed to stay at home in seclusion from the outside world and men are entrusted with the responsibility of providing food and shelter for their dependants. Society tends to believe women's familial responsibilities are more important than their personal careers, and subordinating their own interests to the well-being of their husbands and families is perceived as natural (Kabeer 1994 and 1997). In such a society the role of women as homemakers is glorified under patriarchy and men consider motherhood as the most desirable role of women (Jahan 1975). A family, especially a poorer household with relatively little economic capital, tends to uphold its honour (*izzat*), and thus raises its social capital, through women, by secluding its women from the public realm. This is in part achieved by the ideological and social inculcation of modesty and submission in women (Karim 2008). Female seclusion or the institution of *purdah* restricts women to the private sphere of the home and minimises their interaction with men outside the immediate family (Karim 2008; Kabeer 1988). In so doing, the social system ensures women's participation in family based agricultural production. Furthermore, restrictions placed on movement and mingling with men outside the immediate family effectively preclude women from engaging in economic endeavours and, as a result, women's dependence on men and men's dominance over the lives of women persists (Feldman and McCarthy 1983). As previously stated, historically women in Bangladesh not only perform all domestic chores but also many productive tasks. In their combined roles as housekeepers and mothers they are, to all intents and purposes, perpetually obliged to carry out the entirety of domestic tasks (Huq 1988). Despite the long hours women spend daily working as farmers, food processors and providers - none of this is considered 'work' (Tinker 1990:46) since 'caring work is not deemed to hold an official market value and is excluded from calculations of national income' (Sweetman 2009:180). The fact that women also perform activities that can clearly be seen to be explicitly rather than implicitly productive, such as rearing livestock and growing food seems to be lost in national perceptions of labour contributions. Thus, as I go on to argue throughout the forthcoming chapters, the lack of valorisation of women's productive labour is not an

accident but rather it is a product of patriarchal constructions of gendered value attribution.

As mentioned before, in Bangladesh men are perceived as breadwinners and guardians of the family and their masculine identity in this part of the world also depends on their ability to discharge their responsibility as providers to their dependants, namely women and children. However, this situation is not unique to Bangladesh. Though masculinity, like patriarchy, is not immutable and timeless, men's masculine identity in many parts of the world is constructed around work, (Pease 2009; Qayum and Ray 2010; Legerski and Cornwall 2010; Morrell and Swart 2005; Hearn 1999) since 'work is culturally defined as men's realm' (Connell 2005:78). Correspondingly, in Bangladesh, women's paid employment is mostly regarded as an option, and which may not cast a positive light on their husbands and families (Safa 1995; Salway et al. 2003). Acceptance of the ideological positioning of women's paid employment as damaging to a family's status varies according to social class. Many upper and middle-class people have ceased to subscribe to such ideology. Most poor people, on the other hand, have yet to relinquish the view that women's paid work outside the home conveys the impression that the male head of household has failed/is failing to fulfil his role as provider. As a result, studies (e.g., Kabeer 2000; Salway et al. 2003; Banks 2013) demonstrate that women from poorer households find themselves in a more complicated situation when deciding whether or not to take paid employment outside the home.

In Bangladesh, pervasive poverty has weakened the family system in which women are secluded and reliant on men for their upkeep; nonetheless men are reluctant for their wives to perform paid work in the public realm. Many men who adhere to the conventional ideology are usually of the view that women's paid work is an 'aberration' (Seidler 1997:51) - it is too great a departure from convention/custom. Women's paid employment is opposed by a large number of men not only because it contravenes the social norm of *purdah*, but also because their masculine identity- which is heavily dependent on the breadwinner/provider role- is discredited (Kabeer 2000; Jesmin and Salway 2000). Moreover, many men perceive that women's participation in the paid labour force will erode patriarchal control over women, and so, in turn, many are apprehensive of being deprived of absolute authority over their womenfolk (Banks 2013; Salway et al. 2003; Gordon 1996).

The above observations made in different studies regarding the predicament of women's entry to the labour market illustrate the situation of the female labour force in Bangladesh. The statistics reveal that the country has one of the lowest female employment rates in the world. In Bangladesh, the economically active population is 47.4 million, of which only 11.3 million are women (BBS 2009). After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the country's constitution guaranteed equal rights to both women and men. By and large, the 1970s was marked as an era of women's issues worldwide. During this period economist Ester Boserup's *Women's Role in Economic Development* (1970) revealed how development processes not only ignored women's contribution to the economy but also reflected negatively on their status. For a long time many feminists have expressed worries regarding the neglect of women's issues in processes of development. In line with this concern, liberal feminists came forward with advocacy for the integration of women into the development process (Gordon 1996). Liberal feminists also managed to inspire the United Nations (UN), and with its mandates different international development agencies and national governments adopted various policies and measures to promote women's issues in an effort to incorporate them into development. As a result, the Women in Development (WID) approach emerged as a field of policy and advocacy for many international development agencies and national governments who were predominantly dependent on foreign assistance (Jahan 1995; Gordon 1996; Momsen 2010).

Influenced by the WID perspective which stressed the importance of women's productive roles, various development agencies, feminist organisations, and government organisations viewed employment as key to involving women in the development process. This stance was borne out of the notion that women's subordinate status is to a great extent rooted in limited job opportunities, therefore adequately paid work ought to alleviate this situation (Elson and Pearson 1984). In the mid-1970s the Bangladeshi government, like many other governments of the developing world, was heavily influenced by the UN decade (1976-85) for women. As a result, the government took different measures to enhance the status of women in society. In addition to promoting the cause of the women of the country, the government also may have had the implicit agenda to project itself as a 'modernist, development oriented' regime by complying with the lexicon/catchphrase of WID which was espoused by the donors (Jahan 1995).

The WID approach soon encountered criticism mostly for appearing to treat women as a homogeneous group who are capable of cashing in all available opportunities in a consistent way. By the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century, gender and development (GAD) approaches became prominent as one of the most influential approaches of development, where the concept of gender and gender relations received enormous importance (Momsen 2010). However, it has been argued by some scholars (e.g., Cornwall et al. 2007a and Cornwall et al. 2007b; Cornwall and White 2000) that a significant gap exists between the changes feminists aspired for and the achievements that have been realised.

The post-independence Bangladesh government reserved 10% of the positions for women in officer ranks and 15% in staff ranks in the public sector to ensure their participation in government services (Rahman 2010). The government also established a separate ministry of women's affairs in Bangladesh in 1978 to promote exclusively women issues. Nonetheless, women could not take full advantage of the opportunities created for them. The position of women vis-à-vis men in terms of numbers in government jobs remains relatively insignificant. The majority of women (85.69%) are engaged in the informal sector<sup>2</sup> of the economy despite the efforts of the government to incorporate them into mainstream, formal sector jobs (BBS 2009; Chowdhury 2000). Statistics reveal that no more than 7% of government employees are women at the officer level and 9% at other levels. Although the government has taken different measures over the decades to address gender inequality in the public domain, no effort has been made to redress the inequality in the private sphere (Jahan 1995). The government also seems to fall prey to the belief that equality before the law will successfully address the inferior position of women in society. This discrepancy and inadequacy in government policy may have had a direct impact on women's capacity to reap the benefits of the provisions made in their favour, and lack of social acceptability of women's market and wage work under the norms of seclusion continue to hinder their participation in formal sector employment (Cain et al. 1979). Barriteau (2000) commented that international development institutions, such as The World Bank, The International Labour Organization (ILO) and The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) are inherently aligned to the policies of WID which

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<sup>2</sup> The informal sector is characterised by ease of entry, reliance on indigenous resources, family ownership of enterprises, small scale of operation, labour intensive, and skills acquired outside formal education/training system'. (Sivaramakrishnan et al. 2005:104)

predominantly focuses on women's income earning abilities as the principal means of integrating them into development. It seems similar to these development agencies, Bangladeshi government's initiatives to integrate women in development is also guided by the spirit of WID. As previously stated, the lack of attention in reducing gender inequalities in wider social context in general and in the domestic sphere in particular puts women in an ambivalent situation. As a result, poorer women coming out of their homes in order to take paid work are still thought to suffer from 'extreme loss of status' (Mahmud 1997:239).

Nevertheless, transformations are taking place. One of the most pervasive trends occurring in Bangladesh is that of extensive numbers of women seeking paid work outside the home. Women from wealthy families have benefitted as the shifting global scenario has bestowed them with new employment opportunities (White 1992). The new economic order, access to credit facilities, easy access to information, and exposure to different cultures due to the advancement of technologies contributed to the transformation of upper and middle-class women's perceptions in many respects in developing consciousness about their rights and obligations. However, the situation is different for women from poorer families. Currently, increasing impoverishment is pressing them to engage in paid work outside the home and no longer allows them to rely on what Kandiyoti (1988) refers to as the 'patriarchal bargain'. As Kandiyoti (1988:280) explains the patriarchal bargain is one in which women 'forego economically advantageous options, such as the trading activities engaged in by women in parts of Africa, for alternatives that are perceived as in keeping with their respectable and protected domestic roles, and so they become more exploitable'. Kandiyoti's (1988) analysis of the 'patriarchal bargain' would help the analysis of women's labour force participation in Bangladeshi society.

### **Migration: a new beginning**

As stated before, Bangladesh is predominantly an agricultural country, and the majority of its population lives in rural areas. Over the decades the rate of urbanisation in Bangladesh has, however, been experiencing a remarkable increase due to the extensive trend of rural-urban migration. In fact, since the independence of the country in 1971,



70% of the urban growth experienced in Bangladesh is the outcome of internal migration (Afsar 1999 and 2003). Siddiqui (2003) observes rural-urban migration is often adopted as a 'livelihood strategy' by the poorer people who find it difficult to earn a living in rural areas. As the agricultural sector is the major employer in the rural areas, impoverishment of this particular sector and simultaneous dearth of non-farm employment, sharpens the under and unemployment in these contexts, which leaves little option for many people but to migrate to the urban areas in search of employment (Kabeer and Mahmud 2004; Banks et al. 2011; Sivaramakrishnan et al. 2005). One of the consequences of capitalisation and the mechanisation of agriculture has been its detrimental impacts on prior forms of employment; it severely curtailed employment options, this has been particularly so for women in rural areas (White 1992). The employment options of men and women alike have suffered enormously as a result of growing landlessness and ongoing reliance on technology; by extension, individual and household levels of poverty have been compounded (Kabeer 1994; Feldman 2001). As mentioned before, since the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, various socioeconomic contexts and natural disasters, for example, the cyclone and famine in the 1970s (Dreze and Sen 2013); increasing rural under and unemployment, and subsequent higher levels of poverty place rising demands on large numbers of households that each member of the household must earn a living for him/herself. In such a situation men may be less likely to discharge their responsibilities as providers and try to get away from this obligation which eventually gives rise to divorce, desertion, and an increase in female headed households ( White 1992).

In comparison to rural settings, women's participation in the labour force tends to be higher in urban areas due to greater acceptability and availability of women's paid employment (Kabeer and Mahmud 2004; Momsen 1993; Jesmin and Salway 2000). In corollary over the past few decades an increasing number of poorer women migrate to urban areas with or without a male guardian in order to earn a living for themselves and their family (Kabeer 1997; Kibria 1995). Community related constraints such as kinship bondage and the accountability associated with it, and the inflexibility of observing *purdah* in rural areas places enormous strain on women's (and their family's) notion of self-esteem, which can effectively rule out the possibility of their engagement in unconventional jobs if any employment opportunity emerges. Women are thus likely to feel less stigmatised by joining the labour force in an unfamiliar environment in urban

settings. Furthermore, migration to urban areas often leads to the disintegration of the extended family system, and therefore may liberate women from many patriarchal controls and promote individualism (Gordon 1996; Desai 2003; Jesmin and Salway 2000). Shah's study (2006) of brick kiln workers in India also reveals that economic hardship is not always the main cause of migration. Rather, in many cases migration is perceived by the migrants as an opportunity to gain some freedom and escape critical social scrutiny. My study also finds resonance with Shah's observation that in addition to economic reasons, people's desire to gain independence from coercive social environments can also lead them to migrate. One of my female participants, Razia, told me that she had migrated to Sylhet because, in conjunction with economic independence, she wanted to evade the critical surveillance of her extended family members and acquaintances.

In the 1980s with the growth of export oriented garment factories in Bangladesh women's job opportunities extended to the global market economy (Halim 2004). Kabeer (2000) noted, for the first time in the country's history a large number of women became visible in the labour market. As with many other developing countries, in Bangladesh, women's incorporation in factory employment was considered a necessity on the part of the employers as they are perceived as cheaper and more docile as workers (Walby 1986). Consequently, like other developing countries, in congruence with the observation of Elson and Pearson (1984) Bangladesh has been experiencing women's concentration in low paid and bottom layer jobs in large numbers. Thus, in addition to a harsh financial reality, demand for female labour in expanding garment factories in urban centres has also acted as a reason to migrate into cities for many women (Kibria 1995; Kabeer 1997 and 2000).

Statistics reveal that 85% of the total garment factory workers are female (Afsar 2003; Hossain et al. 2013). Studies conducted on female garment factory workers in Bangladesh also demonstrate that the majority of them are migrants from rural areas (Kabeer 1997; Rahman 2010). Until a few years ago the independent migration of women to urban areas was not a familiar or acceptable phenomenon in the context of social and cultural constructions of gender roles in Bangladeshi society (Kabeer 1997). However, this particular trend of female migration facilitated the beginning of a new form of rural-urban migration, where large numbers of women migrate to urban areas

relying on their own potential as an independent entity. The pioneering rural-urban migrant garment factory workers paved the way for many women and to date a large number of women continue to follow in their footsteps.

The growing garment sector does not accommodate all women willing to sell their labour power. Moreover, insufficient education credentials and lack of demonstrable formal skills exclude many poor landless women from this type of work. Be that as it may, poor women are able to access certain types of paid employment in the public sphere, albeit they are disproportionately concentrated in casual, low status, gender-stereotyped jobs within the informal sector of the labour market. Although educated women are making inroads into formal sector employment, those poor women who teeter on the brink of extreme poverty accept whatever paid employment comes their way. Increasing participation of poorer women in manual labour in the construction sector is a glaring example of this fact (Ahsan 1997; Afsar 1999; Feldman 2001; Ward et al. 2004). In the construction sector poorer women get involved as casual wage workers locally known as *jogali*<sup>3</sup> (helpers). Entry and exit in construction work for *jogalis* are easy as there is no formal job contract or job description. In addition, there is no prerequisite of formal educational qualification or training to enter into such employment. Salway et al. (2003:881) argue that the forms of paid employment available to poorer women are 'becoming increasingly informal'. I found this to be the case for *beti jogalis* in the construction sector in Bangladesh. However, my own study (Choudhury 2010) and Desai (2003) reveal that people with low economic and cultural capital are more likely to take paid employment in sectors where their kinship or friendship network can facilitate their access. People tend to migrate to places where they already have relatives or friends as having relations is considered to be the most favourable factor for migration. This kinship or friendship network not only facilitates the migrants to become acclimatised in an unfamiliar urban environment but also efficiently shapes the process of their entrance into the labour force. Thus, it is not surprising that most of the migrants do not choose the niche by themselves; rather they end up being engaged in the similar forms of employment of their resource person or fellow slum dwellers. Guerin (2013) and Picherit (2012) in India find that the role of middlemen is very important in the lives of villagers who want to migrate and take up

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<sup>3</sup> Male and female construction sector helpers are called *beta jogali* and *beti jogali* respectively. I have used *jogali* and construction worker(s) interchangeably.

employment in different low return sectors, such as brick kilns, cane-cutting and construction. This was, however, not necessarily the case for my participants. Although the contact persons played important catalytic roles in finding jobs for them, comments made by my participants revealed that there was no pressure imposed on them to choose a particular form of employment.

People migrate to places where they expect to find some support from their social network or contact person, yet in many cases they face difficulties in the new socio-economic and cultural context. Desai (2003) and Pattanaik (2009) noted, among the informal sector workers in India the situation of construction workers is precarious. Their status of being migrants in the urban setting, and limited socioeconomic and cultural capital in an unfamiliar social setting makes them more vulnerable and less confident to efficiently negotiate with the clever construction sector middlemen. A similar observation was made by Gardner (2008) in her study conducted in Sylhet, Bangladesh. Through the narrative of a participant of her study Gardner demonstrated how agents/middlemen/*sardars*<sup>4</sup> often use different tricks to pay less than the committed wages to the labourers. In addition to such vulnerability, in construction work sex stereotyping is paramount and the situation for women is worse where they are basically engaged in low paid carrying activities (Basu and Thomas 2009). These observations made in the Indian context mirrored the situation of *beti jogalis* (female construction sector helpers) in Bangladesh.

In the 1990s almost half of employed women were engaged in the agricultural sector, while the service sector accounted for one third, and manufacturing and construction absorbed one fifth of employed women (Mahmud 2003). According to the Labour Force Surveys the average wage rate for female agricultural labourers is less than half that of the average wage rate for males. This discrepancy is even higher in the case of non-agricultural workers where female workers receive little more than one-third of the male wage rate (Mahmud 2003; BBS 2009). In informal sector employment women are more likely to face different forms of gendered discrimination and exploitation, such as low wages in comparison to their male co-workers or payment made in kind and less favourable contractual agreements, which seems to be associated with the prevailing

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<sup>4</sup> Sardars are the construction sector middlemen

male centred cultural norms and practices (Kabeer 2008). Patriarchal societal norms often downplay women's income earning ability and attach lesser value attribution to women's financial contribution (Wolf 1991). There is a widespread belief that 'men need an income to support a family, while women do not' (Elson and Pearson 1981:92). The continuation of 'the myth of the male breadwinners' perpetuates the secondary status of women in the labour market (Safa 1995). I will apply Safa's (1995) analysis of 'the myth of the male breadwinners' to explain the work experiences of female construction workers.

### **Implications of women's paid employment**

Incorporating women into development emerged as a major challenge in the 1970s, in response to this challenge many scholars and development agencies put forward the suggestion of stipulating job provisions for women. They seemed to believe increasing women's share in productive sources would provide them power and enhance their position (Malhotra and Mather 1997). Western feminist analysis particularly has emphasised women's waged work and resultant economic independence as a key to freeing them from male dominance (Tinker 1990). They deem women's autonomy predominantly lies in their ability to gain access to material resources and, crucially, establish control over them (see Blumberg 1991).

However, over the last few decades women's engagement all over the world in the bottom layer, 'unskilled', and low paid jobs directed many writers (e.g., Elson and Pearson 1984; Pearson 2007; Young 1989; Safa 1981) to contest the belief that engaging in paid employment is sufficient on its own to alter women's position fundamentally and integrate them into development. According to these scholars, the outcome is not emancipation, but rather participation in paid work may expose women to different dimensions of oppression (Elson and Pearson 1981; Kung 1983; Young 1988 cited in Zaman 2001). In addition, engaging in paid employment exposes women to a double or triple burden of work (Momsen 2010) and compels them to do a 'second shift' (Hochschild 1989:259). In poorer households women's paid employment is considered by many as an extension of their domestic responsibility as they are contributing to the survival of their family; women themselves also appear to be less

prone to claim personal autonomy or self-esteem as an outcome of their paid employment (Safa 1995). I argue that this can also be the case for the female construction workers in Bangladesh, but it is more complex than this.

As, on the other hand, other writers (e.g., Lim 1983 and 1990; Meyer 2006; Krugman 1997) believe, in many respects women's paid employment reflects positively on their well-being. For example, Lim (1983) asserts that, notwithstanding women's lower wages and inadequate working conditions, paid employment enables many women to postpone early marriage and unwanted pregnancies, aids them to emerge from the confines of their domestic residence, grants them a broader range of possibilities, and brings them a greater degree of economic self-reliance.

In a gender stratified society like Bangladesh where 'sex stereotyping' (Young 1988) is a common phenomenon, it is no wonder that the ongoing subjugated position of women in the domestic sphere effectively expands its perimeter to the workplace and places them in a secondary position there as well. Mackintosh (1984) argues in the realm of paid employment, women tend to be concentrated in certain jobs and occupations on the basis of their gender. Although a large number of poorer women, engaged in paid labour, are the sole or the principal breadwinners of their family, they are generally perceived as 'supplementary' (Safa 1984:1168) earners. This tendency of undermining women's role leads Elson and Pearson (1981) to persuasively argue that instead of freeing women from oppression, paid employment can rather intensify and reinforce their marginalisation in the society. They further suggested that this marginalisation is not the mere reflection of 'patriarchal attitude'. In fact, it is a technique to perpetuate women's subordination. Although women are aware of the discrimination they face in workplace, their poor fallback position often causes them to accept this subordinate status. Furthermore, in Bangladeshi society women are socialised to accept men's superior position in the home; throughout their lives women are under the guardianship of men, namely father, husband and son (see Chowdhury 2000), and this reality tends to hinder women's abilities to question and undermine the male authority within the home, no matter what the circumstances are.

Despite these optimistic and pessimistic prognoses of women's engagement in paid employment, it is expected that there will be a number of explicit and implicit changes in existing gender relations in households when women are engaged in full-time paid

employment (Brines 1994). Researchers in different social settings studied the issue of whether men take on more of the burden of unpaid household chores when women increase their participation in paid employment, leading to a more equal gender division of labour in the household; or whether unpaid domestic work remains a female responsibility alongside increasing female participation in paid work. The researchers are interested in investigating whether women's earning ability accrues them more 'voice' (Hirschman 1970) to negotiate with husbands about important familial matters, and also self-esteem related issues.

### **Women's paid employment and household divisions of labour**

Oakley's (1974) research in the UK found that husbands were not assuming a larger share of household related duties when women were engaged in paid employment. She also found that generally husbands from poorer households do less housework than middle-class husbands (cited in Ericksen et al. 1979). Huber and Spitze (1981) in their research in the USA revealed that married couples were startlingly resistant to changing household norms and behaviours. Beblo and Robledo's (2008) more recent research in Germany found even when both husband and wife earn equal wages, men enjoy more leisure time than their wives. Gwozdz and Sousa-Poza's (2010) study in Germany showed total time spent on housework by women decreased while men's behaviour has remained surprisingly constant. They observed that women had to change their behaviour regarding domestic chores in order to establish a balance with men. The study, however, revealed that in spite of different efforts to minimise the gap between men and women's work in the domestic sphere, the inequality between genders persists. Similarly Baxter (2002) found in Australia that the gender gap between men's and women's involvement in housework is becoming less significant. However this situation has resulted from women's lesser time spent on domestic labour, not from men's increased participation in housework.

Bernhardt, Noack and Lyngstad (2008) in their study argue that even though Norway and Sweden hold more egalitarian ideologies, they seem to share parallel social features of 'less gender-equal' societies in terms of actual sharing of domestic loads. The researchers go on to say that both the partners share a more equal load of domestic

chores only under special circumstances, for instance, when the family is childless or childfree, or when both of the partners are highly educated and earn a high income, or when the female partner works full-time and male partner does not do overtime. Above mentioned cross cultural studies show an impressive resistance by men to an equal involvement in household chores irrespective of their locations. For instance, in Germany, Australia, Spain, UK, and the USA core domestic tasks in dual earner households continue to be done mainly by women.

Under classic patriarchy in Bangladesh, men and women generally hold a conservative gender ideology which shapes their worldview in such way that women internalise their lower status in society vis-à-vis men (see Kandiyoti 2005). Studies conducted in Bangladesh reveal that married women continue to perform the dominant share of household chores even when they are engaged in full-time paid employment (Zohir and Yunus 2000). Women's 'second shift' (Hochschild 1989) and acceptance of a subordinate position may be explained by what Sen (1990) in his 'cooperative-conflicts' model of household decision making calls the 'perceived interest response'. Bangladeshi women believed that to sacrifice their own self-interest for the well-being of their families in the long-term perceived interest that they would get the return in terms of love, respect and recognition from their family members in future. Alternatively it may be explained by Hirschman's (1970) 'voice/exit' theory, which is a functional way to analyse the dilemma of women who are tangled in values and norms even when the classic patriarchy is at risk. Even in patriarchal societies, Kabeer (1999:438) argues, women use their agency in the form of 'bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance'. I contend that women have agency but in a highly patriarchal context it is not uncontested and, as such, women often use subtle forms of resistance; which can be explained by what James Scott (1987) termed as 'weapons of the weak', as I discuss further in chapter V.

Many writers (e.g., Bhachu 1988; Pease 2009; Pesser 1988; Davin 1996; Kibria 1990) suggest that migration potentially provides women and men with the opportunity to transcend existing gender divisions of labour. Women's access to paid employment along with migration to a new setting may allow men (and women) to accept a more egalitarian shift in terms of household divisions of labour and decision making (see Pease 2009). In line with this observation, contravening the societal norm of



Bangladesh, some husbands have expressed their willingness to embrace new social reality by sharing the load of household chores. Zohir and Yunus' (2000) research even found that some husbands are 'helping' their wives in different chores such as cutting, cooking, cleaning, washing, all of which are customarily viewed as 'women's work'. However, the men who share domestic loads with wives mostly do it due to the unavailability of wives' services and maintain secrecy about their 'help' as they tend to believe doing 'women's work' could damage their masculine identity. Social, cultural and religious practices of Bangladesh have assigned men such a higher position in society that women also seem not to share mundane domestic chores with men. Rather, they seem to pay extra care and attention to their husbands so that their masculine identity does not feel threatened. Hence, instead of sharing the housework with men, most women either continue to bear the full burden of domestic chores, or share it with other female members, particularly their daughters (Momsen 2010; Kabeer 1997). Hossain et al. (1988) observed that significant transformations in women's 'functional role' did not lead to a corresponding noteworthy change in men's perceptions, and 'family roles' continue to be resistant to change; thus leading women to play dual roles both as 'productive' workers and as 'reproductive' women- what Hochschild (1989) described as the 'double shift'.

### **Women's autonomy and paid employment**

Kusterer, Estrada de Batres, and Xuya Cuxil (1981) and Blumberg's (1985; 1989) research in Guatemala sheds light on the issues associated with women's paid employment. Their studies found that women who earn a significant amount by engaging in paid work enjoy 'increased independence, self-reliance, self-respect, the perceived respect of their families, and greater self-esteem' (cited in Blumberg 1991:114). In Sri Lanka, Malhotra and Mather (1997) found that married women engaged in paid employment are able to establish considerable control over their earnings as the cultural practice of the society does not perceive it as an inappropriate behaviour on the part of women. Thus, women's paid employment confers them greater economic independence and facilitates overt decision making regarding important financial issues. Acharya and Bennett's (1981; 1982; 1983) study in the context of Nepal also reveals that women's access to paid employment is associated with their

greater decision making power over the households' most important resource allocation decisions (cited in Blumberg 1991:112). Similarly, Gates (2002) assumes employment may strengthen Mexican women's bargaining position at home because it is the principal means of gaining access to an independent income, which enables women to extend financial support to their families. Wolf's (1991) study of Javanese factory workers shows women's earning ability facilitates them with greater freedom from patriarchal control. Similarly, studies (e.g., Krugman 1997; Sargent and Matthews 1997) conducted on Maquiladora employment in Mexico manifest that the implications of these jobs reflect positively on women's emancipation.

However, as previously stated, several writers argue that women's paid employment is not always straightforwardly emancipatory. For instance, Safa (1981) argues a job may give a woman a degree of economic autonomy and loosen the bonds of a patriarchal family, but it also exposes her to a new form of exploitation on the factory floor, and government control. In the Taiwanese context Greenhalgh (1985) found that women are situated at the bottom of the hierarchy in the job market and are vulnerable to different sorts of exploitation. Many of the Taiwanese women in Wolf's (1990) study did not leave school to take up factory employment of their own volition and for their personal benefit. On the contrary, many were compelled to do so to meet some of the family's financial requirements, and mostly for the purposes of financing their brother's educational expenses. Therefore, for this group of women, paid employment did not provide the means by which to thwart or undermine patriarchal control.

Existing studies conducted in the context of Bangladesh suggest that the implications of women's earning ability on gender relations is highly complex and contested as the cultural practice of the society usually does not approve of independent and self-reliant behaviour on the part of women (Kabeer 1997; Kibria 1995). Even in times of acute hardship working for cash in the public sphere causes women to lose status, as it is contrary to the norms of *purdah* (Amin 1997). In addition, women often suffer discrimination in terms of job hierarchy and earnings although there is no evident bias in labour demand (Mahmud 1997). Salway et al. (2005) in their study also found that employment of poor, urban women in Bangladesh does not present a powerful and significant challenge to gender identities. Working women in many instances are not at all able to establish control over their own income, and are persuaded to relinquish the

right in favour of the male authority of the household (Kabeer 1997; Kibria 1995; Zohir and Yunus 2000). Kibria (1995) observed that women's involvement in the labour force as yet has not brought remarkable transformation in dominant gender relations in the household. The challenges towards the prevailing family relations have mostly emerged due to the continuing macro structural shifts such as increasing internal migration, breakdown of extended families, ever-rising numbers of female headed households and so forth. Women's experiences in a gender stratified society like Bangladesh can be explored by drawing on the theoretical argument offered by Blumberg (1991). Blumberg's (1991) gender stratification theory suggests women may not gain the full advantage of their financial contribution at home where a greater level of gender inequality exists at the society's macro level (e.g., society, state). Male macro power often reduces the impact of women's input in the home (micro level) and perpetuates women's subordinate status regardless of their contribution to the well-being of the family.

Given these concerns, there is evidence that in the context of Bangladesh women who are engaged in paid employment are more likely to have greater voice in important familial and financial decisions, enhanced awareness of one's selfhood, increased mobility and wider opportunity to mingle with people outside the immediate family without much difficulty in comparison to women who are not involved in paid employment. Women's access to an independent income appears to facilitate the renegotiations of the terms of marital interaction. It is associated with recognition from husbands, fewer conjugal conflicts and to some extent women's power to make overt and covert decisions about their own (and their family's) well-being (Salway et al. 2005; Zohir and Yunus 2000). Anderson and Eswaran's (2009) study also resonates the findings that earning an independent income within marriage significantly increases women's autonomy in household decisions. Kibria (1995) noted that a great majority of the female factory workers in her study held a 'positive' attitude about their employment. Women appear to believe that involvement in income earning activities has acted as a catalyst to boost their sense of self-respect and value in the household. According to Kabeer (1997:301), women's greater participation in paid employment generates various positive shifts both in an individual woman's life and wider structural contexts. Salway et al. (2005) reckon the increasing involvement of women in paid

employment would eventually facilitate them with a wide range of options, more egalitarian gender relations and substantial command over different aspects of life.

It is thus evident from the studies conducted in different developed and developing countries that paid employment outside the home has a mixed impact upon the lives of women. In Bangladeshi cultural practice a woman is taught to be docile, consenting and self-sacrificing from the beginning of her life. The institution of marriage and *purdah* crystallises women's dependent status. In congruence with these institutions' regulations, social norms not only discourage women from fostering emancipatory values and autonomous behaviour but also cause them to uphold male supremacy. Again, in contrast to these values, women are obliged to take paid employment on the verge of men's inability to discharge their responsibilities as provider or in case of unavailability of a reliable breadwinner. Although paid employment is believed to be one of the important cornerstones of loosening the bond of patriarchal oppression, paid employment may not automatically confer them equality and emancipation unless women can establish control over their earnings (Blumberg 1991). In such situations the implications of women's paid work on gender relations are not easy to articulate and cannot be adequately explained with a single theoretical perspective. I therefore draw on a multiple theoretical frameworks to portray the nature of masculinities, femininities and changing gender relations in the context of Bangladesh. The next chapter articulates the methodological frameworks employed in this study to elicit necessary data to portray a picture of the people involved in the construction sector in Bangladesh.

## **Chapter III: Research design and data generation**

### **Introduction**

In this study I sought to explore the construction of masculinity and femininity in contemporary Bangladesh and also the changing gender relations female construction workers experience within and outside the home. The specific objectives of the study were to investigate: the negotiation process of female construction workers in joining the workforce in a patriarchal context; the implications of their paid employment on constructions of masculinity and femininity; gender divisions of labour within and beyond the household; women's and men's perceptions of women's paid employment, life choices, rights and responsibilities; women's autonomy and agency, and everyday lived experiences both as members of their respective households and as female construction workers in a male dominated public sphere.

Gardner and Lewis (1996:168) noted, 'anthropology encourages us to dig as deeply as possible, to go beyond what is immediately apparent, and to uncover as much of the complexity of social and economic life that we can'. As a consequence, in this research I employed ethnographic and feminist methodological frameworks/ approaches within broader qualitative methodological approaches. One important element of a feminist methodological approach, for example, is a concern about relative power relations between researcher and research participants (so termed as opposed to subjects or informants) and an attempt to conduct research in ways that are not exploitative, that takes participants' needs into account and embeds reflexivity into the process (Letherby 2003). As Clisby and Holdsworth (2014:14) summarise, 'In line with this feminist approach we have [and I have] been concerned to address power imbalances between researchers and participants, beginning with the experiences and standpoint of women and aim to promote social change'.

Data for this study were generated from ethnographic observation of day-to-day life of male and female construction workers, life history interviews with female construction workers, in-depth semi-structured interviews with the husbands and male co-workers of female construction workers, and informal conversations with different influential social

actors to grasp a holistic picture of the various dimensions of masculinity, femininity and the changing gender relations in this particular context of contemporary Bangladeshi society. As I wished to give women 'voice' through my study and wished this study to be accessible to a wider group for the greater benefits of the women involved in my research, I believe the methodologies I employed best serve the purpose of my research.

Green (2010) preferred to use the terminology 'data generation and production' instead of collection as she believed that 'the terminology data collection implies that the data is just out there and waiting to be collected like rubbish bags on the pavement' (Dey 1993:15, cited in Green 2010:28). Following her arguments I also eschewed the term collection in favour of generation in my study, because in qualitative research knowledge is always created and mediated through the interaction between the researcher and the participant of the research (see Guba and Lincoln 2000). I conceptualised the issues of investigation and familiarised the participants with the interview process and wrote down all the comments and statements made by them during our discussions. After ensuring that the participants did not have objections, I recorded the interviews and took pictures of them to represent their lives, work and gender relations in a more intelligible way. For this study, Sylhet, a city in Bangladesh had been chosen purposively. It is located in the North Eastern part of Bangladesh.

### **Site selection**

Sylhet, the city where the study was conducted, draws a large number of internal migrants given its status as a relatively wealthy city in Bangladesh. People of this particular geographic area have a history of international migration. They had started to migrate to the UK during the colonial regime and gradually migrated to the USA, Middle East and different European countries (Gardner 1993; 1995b and 2009a; Eade and Garbin 2003). The people who have migrated over the years still have their roots in Sylhet and they tend to visit from time to time and send remittances to the members of their extended families. They also usually try to own material property in their locality of origin to symbolise their economic affluence and success, in addition to the intention of keeping ties intact (see Gardner 1993; Eade and Garbin 2003). Keeping up with the

desire of the migrants, and also to realise their own ambitions, remittance receiving households commonly spend the remittances on constructing high rise buildings and eye-catching shopping malls inside and outside the city (Gardner 2009a and 2009b; Eade and Garbin 2003). Gardner (2009a:237) noted, international migration from Sylhet boosted the local economy of Sylhet and created greater employment opportunities for internal migrants in Sylhet. There is a tendency observed among the remittance receiving households to construct new structures which led to a 'construction boom'. As such, Sylhet the city where I was born and brought up, has been going through a massive phase of construction. Remittance inflow also helps the informal sector to grow and in turn, facilitates many people to find their employment in Sylhet (Gardner 2008; Gardner and Ahmed 2006). The construction workers are one of the noteworthy groups which managed to reap the direct benefit of this phenomenon (Gardner 2008 and 2009a). As stated earlier, since the entry and exit in this sector is relatively informal and many people who do not have demonstrable and marketable skills can enter this sector, women with extremely limited choices can therefore engage themselves in such work. As a consequence, the construction sector now comprises of a relatively large proportion of female workers (BBS 2009; see Kabeer 1994; Mahmud 2003). Statistics reveal this sector is represented by nearly 3% of employed men and 1% of women. However, the number is increasing everyday as more and more women are joining the labour force (Asian Development Bank 2001). There are now hardly any construction sites in Sylhet where numbers of *beti jogalis* (female construction workers) are not visible. They usually congregate in specific points in the city in the morning and wait to be hired by some construction agencies, supervisors or individuals.

There are 6-7 points in Sylhet city where the construction workers flock to look for work. The points are Madina Market point, Shibgonj point, Niorpool point, Tilagahr point, Amberkhana point, Chouhatta point etc. Among these, Amberkhana, Madina market and Niorpool points were selected for the study. The rationale behind this decision was as follows: the large concentration of *beti jogalis* in each point, easy accessibility of each of the areas, approachability of the gatekeepers, and willingness of the participants.

**Selection of research participants and gaining access**

Forty female and 20 male participants were purposively selected for this study. Both female and male participant construction workers were recruited from Amberkhana, Madina Market and Niorpool point of Sylhet city. This selection procedure was guided by the criteria of participants' place of origin, age, marital status, religion and willingness to talk to me. I put emphasis on these criteria in selecting the participants because earlier experience of conducting research with female construction workers revealed that women's experiences of both the private and public sphere depends on their age in many ways. Marital status also makes a significant difference to women's experiences, particularly when women are the household heads and principal breadwinners of the family. Diverse origins of the participants are associated with dissimilar constraints and experiences they faced, which is helpful for the better understanding about the group. Husbands of married participant female construction workers were chosen purposively. Some husbands were not necessarily construction workers but they still were selected as participants of the research. However, age and duration of marriage for the husbands were the criteria of selection, as I found during my earlier research in 2009-2010 that a man's age and the duration of his marriage can have a significant bearing on his attitude regarding ideas of masculinities, femininities and existing gender relations inside and outside the home. For instance, Roab (47) one of my participants told me that after 15-16 years of his marriage now he could completely rely on his wife's thoughts as he had the confidence that she would do things for the betterment of their family. Another participant, Jalal, who was married for a couple of years, however did not express a similar level of reliance on his wife's considerations. Participant male construction workers were also selected from diverse age groups to understand the perceptions of different generations. Importance was given to the marital status in recruiting participants as it allowed me to compare and contrast the views of single and married men towards women's paid employment in the heavily male dominated public sphere. For example, Nokhal (17), the youngest of my male participants, placed great emphasis on his ability to earn an income and keep his female family members out of the labour market, where women need to interact with non-kin men. To him, his ability to provide for his family members, e.g., mother and future wife, is a key indicator of his manhood. Older married participants, such as Kacha (56) and Joynul (54) on the other hand held a more complex view of manhood, their provisioning



role and women's paid employment. Selecting male participants of different geographic origins facilitated an understanding of whether differential cultural values and practices lead people to think differently or conversely, whether irrespective of prior cultural experiences, men behave in a uniform way.

In addition to my research participants, I was also able to chat, socialise, discuss issues and have conversations with numerous people (both male and female) who were also somehow involved in the construction sector or the lives of my participants. They were engineers, contractors, *sarders*, construction workers, tea shop owners, site supervisors and neighbourhood women of my participants. I spent hours on construction sites for an extended period of time and observed the day-to-day life of construction workers. This stay on construction sites facilitated my interaction with the people mentioned above and the informal talks I had with them were immensely beneficial for me to understand a more comprehensive ethnographic picture of the life of construction workers.

I stayed in the field for 12 months, initially from December 2009 to February 2010 when I did 2 months pilot research, and then 10 months from July 2011 to May 2012 to ethnographically observe the day-to-day life of the sample population and organise and administer the life history and semi-structured interviews. This stay in the field facilitated the development of an excellent rapport and understanding with the participants. At the beginning I visited all the major points where the construction workers congregate in the morning to sell their labour power. Since I was already familiar with the arrangement of congregating/meeting points as I had undertaken research with female construction workers before, I was aware that in order to gain access to the participants I needed to approach the gate keepers first. At the first visit to the Amberkhana point I approached one of the *sarders* (middlemen) and discussed the nature of my work, the kind of information I needed and how I could get it. I introduced myself as a researcher, currently studying at a British university but a permanent resident of Sylhet city. The *sarder* was cooperative and he understood the importance of my work and agreed to extend his support. He introduced me to some *beti jogalis*. He also assured the female construction workers about my intentions. I found another *sarder* who operates in Madina Market point. He was familiar with me and my work as I conducted my research with the female construction workers of Madina Market point before. Similarly I approached a *sarder* in Niorpool and managed to gain access to my

participants through him. The *sarders* were the gatekeepers to the participants. Therefore, it was imperative on my part to build a good relationship with the powerful people involved with the work of the participants. Once rapport was established at this level, it was much easier to establish direct contact with the participants. Although the *sarders* kindly helped me, always they had a reservation regarding a woman's presence in a heavily male dominated field which was manifested through their comments, for example, "It seems you are from a good family. Why do you come here [congregating points]? Don't you have a man (family member) to help you? Why don't you send someone else to do it for you?"

Contrary to men's aforementioned reaction, I also experienced men's over enthusiasm on a few occasions. For example, when I used to go to socialise with female construction workers at the congregating points, many male construction workers came forward and told me "if you want to know anything, ask us. We can tell you whatever you want to know. These women do not know much". It was also a difficult situation to handle; I had to be careful not to offend them while concentrating on my task at hand—socialising with the women and observing both men and women.

### **A day begins at Amberkhana point**

Construction workers generally start their day at around 7 am. People who wish to find roof making tasks need to start their day as early as 4.30 or 5 in the morning. Most of the construction workers congregate in the meeting points to find jobs so I also went to Amberkhana point, one of the busiest workers congregating points to start my day with construction workers. When I reached there at around 7.15 in the morning, a good number of *beta and beti jogalis* were already waiting for potential recruiters. Amberkhana point is a 15 minute walk from my home so I walked there. Although the city streets were still very quiet, the scenario of Amberkhana point was entirely different as it became very busy, noisy and vibrant with construction workers waiting there.

Some of the workers were still walking towards the congregating point to join others, I could see them walking with their axes and cane baskets while I myself was walking to Amberkhana point. Workers were already waiting there, some of them were standing,

others were sitting on the footpath and sharing light moments amongst themselves by chatting, criticising the recruiters and co-workers, and cracking jokes. A few female construction workers, who already knew me, had greeted me with smiles, introduced me to their co-workers standing next to them and chatted with me. Some male construction workers came to me as soon as they saw me and started to ask what I was looking for and wanted to impose themselves on me saying that they could help me in better ways. They appeared to be very keen to know about my intentions of standing at the congregating point. I tried to maintain distance from them by seeing their over enthusiasm as I could sense it as a potential problem both as a woman and a researcher. I told them that I went there to meet *beti jogalis* and would let them know when I needed their help. Although I tried to keep them off without offending them, they did not pay much attention to it, and were standing in a way as if they were making a circle by keeping me in the middle. I remained under the scrutiny of these men for quite a while and felt that most of the male construction workers, *sarders* and recruiters present stared at me, with surprise and curiosity in their eyes, at least once.



Some of the male construction workers and *sarders* were smoking cheap cigarettes locally known as *bidi*, while a number of male and female construction workers were chewing *pan-supari* (betel nuts and leaves) with strongly flavoured tobacco locally known as *shada pata* and *zarda*. A number of both male and female construction workers bought tea and cheap bread or cookies from the mobile tea shop situated at the congregating point. Some of them did not have the money to buy tea so they were requesting the shop owner to sell tea to them and they would pay the money the next morning. A female construction worker was requesting one of her male co-workers to buy her a cup of tea but he refused flatly.

The place became increasingly crowded as the day progressed. The city streets also became busy as it was already time to start the day for others as well who needed to go to schools, colleges and offices. Amberkhana point is one of the busiest intersections which interconnects the important streets of the city so I was expecting to see some of my friends and family members passing by and see me standing at the point with the construction workers and wonder what I was doing there. So, on the one hand my roots to Sylhet city facilitated my research greatly as I had some kind of understanding about the place and people; and on the other, being a resident of Sylhet city also raised different issues and I always had to remain careful about my ‘proper’ behaviour as a ‘respectful’ woman.

The congregating point did not smell great because of dirt, an open dustbin situated nearby, smoke of *bidis*, smell of other tobaccos (e.g., *shada*, *zarda*, *pan-supari*) and too many people standing in close proximity. We all standing there could feel/smell each other’s breath and body odour, sometimes people were coming uncomfortably close and jostling others to move forward or backward just to make their way. Frequently random individuals came, stood aimlessly, and left after a while. Since I was not familiar with such situations, I became very conscious about myself and remained attentive so that no one (especially men around me) could push me or touch me in an inappropriate manner. Even as a researcher, in front of the male gaze at the congregating point, as a stranger, I became very aware of my gendered identity and ‘proper’ behaviour as a middle-class woman. In the midst of this, recruiters came now and then; as soon as a recruiter comes all the workers rush towards him and try to convince the recruiter to recruit him/her. Recruiters selected workers; negotiations went on with *sardars* and individual workers. Some workers also occasionally got involved in arguments among themselves as all of them wanted to secure jobs but unfortunately jobs were not available for all. I realised prior to coming to the point that most of the recruiters make up their mind about the criteria of the workers they are looking for and try to recruit workers who almost, if not exactly, fit their criteria. Workers who do not get recruited feel frustrated and often vent disappointment on co-workers. At around 10 am a good number of workers had found jobs and subsequently left the congregating point. By 10.30 in the morning, people who could not find work were about to leave the point as there was no hope of getting a job on that day. I also left the place and went to a construction site.

### Researching women

My previous experience of researching female construction workers shows that if the participants are directly approached, they are reticent, not wishing to talk to an unknown person without prior permission of their *sarders* or the influential people of their community. However, I never involved *sarders* in selecting my participants. They (*sarders*) introduced me to 1 or 2 female construction workers and told them about my intention to talk to them, than I continued in my own way. In the effort to familiarise myself with the female construction workers and to establish contact with the participants, I used to spend some time in Niorpool, Madina Market or in Amberkhana point every morning. I visited some of the participants' houses and the construction sites where they work. I used to visit one of the points mentioned above and approach one of the participants each morning and subsequently talk to them. At the beginning some of the participants seemed hesitant about the nature and aims of my work. In the following chapters I discuss how women became more aware of their own well-being and as a reflection of it they seemed to be very cautious while talking to unknown people in private places. However, after my meeting with one or two participants, things changed dramatically. All of the female construction workers of Amberkhana, Niorpool and Madina Market point who became aware of me and my research, showed an interest in talking to me. My participants told me that they talked about me among themselves and also encouraged their co-workers/friends to share their experiences with me. Even some of my participants suggested their husbands come and talk to me if I showed an interest in them. Wives' enthusiasm to send their husbands to talk to me emanated from their wishes to know what their husbands think about them and was also guided by the hope that their husbands would be more understanding about their (wives') plight if they discuss their lived experience with me in greater detail. My own subject position as a middle-class, educated woman played a significant role in earning this acceptability among female construction workers and even their husbands (see Hammersley and Atkinson 1997; Coffey 1999). The participant construction workers and husbands of female construction workers never turned down my request to have a conversation. In cases where this was not possible due to their work schedule (that had been fixed prior to my approaching them), they promised to talk to me again at a mutually convenient time.

On the occasion of conducting the life histories of female construction workers in order to generate data, the interview/conversation sessions on most occasions lasted between 6-8 hours over the course of several repeated sessions. The follow up meetings with the same participant did not take place on consecutive days. Generally they took place a few days after the initial meeting. Although I went to visit my participants in their home, I did not interview them in their own house. The reasoning behind this was a desire to avoid interruptions. These were likely in their dwelling environments as they predominantly live in crowded slums and, the visit of a stranger may incur inquisitiveness among other slum dwellers. Therefore, by removing these factors, interviewing women outside of their own home meant that theoretically at least, they might be able to converse more freely (see Hearn 1998). Having long conversations with my participants in a café was not the ideal situation in Bangladesh as the cafés are always crowded and long conversations with my participants might draw undue attention of other people which could make both of us uncomfortable so I intentionally avoided the idea of meeting my participants in cafés. Fortunately I had access to the house of one of my contacts, which was an old but comfortable, quiet house surrounded by trees and with a wide yard at the front, and was located in an easily accessible locality. The house owners had not been living there at that time, although there were both male and female caretakers to look after the property. I found this place suitable for our interview sessions as it was relatively easy to ensure privacy and uninterrupted conversations, and the place was not far from my participants' dwelling places and congregating points. When I recruited my first participant, I explained to her the need to sit in a quiet and comfortable place and gained her consent to take her there for the interview. Female construction workers often go to different places with recruiters so it was not new for them and my gendered identity as a woman also provided them with some sense of security. I introduced her to the house keepers and she appeared to be comfortable. After meeting 2-3 women in the same venue and conducting their life history interviews, I never had the necessity to explain more about the place as most of the women already knew about the place through word of mouth of the women I interviewed and were happy to meet me there for interviews.

Feminist research places emphasis on power relations and suggests that the power relations between the researcher and the researched should be as non-hierarchical as possible (Oakley 1981; Letherby 2003; Clisby and Holdsworth 2014). Following this

advice I tried to apply different techniques to lessen the hierarchy between me and the participants. During the discussions, conversation did not flow at all times. Participants used to take rests, we used to drink tea with cookies or light snacks, and sometimes we had our lunch together. Although I do not chew *pan-supari* (betel nuts and leaves), I used to buy *pan-supari* for my participants if they wished as this is commonly used in Bangladesh, especially by poorer people, maybe because it quells hunger. However, regardless of the availability of food, there are some people who can manage long hours without having a proper meal but it is unthinkable for them to do without *pan-supari* (see Kabeer 1994). Additionally, from the discussions with the participant female construction workers over the issue of their co-workers' behaviour towards them, I realised that offering *pan-supari* means someone is extending his/her friendship and I also wanted to use this opportunity to express my friendliness (see Malinowski 1922). Offering tea, *pan-supari*, light snacks, and sharing my food with them helped to develop relationships in the field. It appeared that food sharing conveyed the message that I am not only with them in order to generate my research data, rather, I wanted to show them gratitude for their help and I valued them as individuals.

Oakley (1981) places emphasis on reducing power differentials in the researcher and interviewee relationship. In other words, it should be a joint effort, including reciprocity on behalf of the researcher i.e., talking about herself and answering questions that participants may pose. Reflecting upon my fieldwork, I can say that I followed this approach throughout my life history interviews. I replied to different questions about my personal life and when the participants used to make comparisons between themselves and me, I highlighted the commonalities we share as women but acknowledged my weaknesses, such as my physical inability to do the levels of hard work they do everyday on the construction sites. In this way I tried to give my participants more control over the interviews and thus, in turn, more control over the whole process of research (Letherby 2003). Drawing on a life history approach was also part of my feminist methodological approach because, '[l]ife history interviews have long been a favoured method for many social scientists and feminist researchers, noted for their humanizing and empowering capacities in which participants are better able to determine the focus and direction of the research' (Clisby and Holdsworth 2014:15).

Clisby et al. (2007:10) commented although telling their own stories may involve revisiting painful experiences for many women, they, however, can find this opportunity a 'rewarding' one as it allows them to share their stories with compassionate listeners. Reay (1995) observed that women who are more marginalised generally feel that it is a pleasurable experience to 'have someone to listen to them'. I also experienced something similar during my fieldwork with female construction workers. I observed that the participants seemed to like it when they were encouraged to talk about their own lives and everyday experiences.

Whilst this may seem somewhat patronising and Spivak (1988) also argues an 'interlocutor' (in this case me) needs to renounce the benefit of all sorts of privilege even to have a rudimentary form of understanding of 'subaltern' women's lives, I however, believe that acknowledgement of my position as an educated, middle-class, relatively liberated woman facilitated both me and my participants to reconstruct their experiences in their own terms. I never tried to restrict their conversations to my area of interest and this enhanced the process of making them more comfortable. However, there were a few participants who did not like to talk about painful experiences particularly regarding financial hardship of their lives. They considered the difficult events as their destiny and felt that it would not make things better if they talked about it. With the exception of a few occasions the participants were generally happy to tell their stories. Given my educational and class background, my efforts to minimise the distance between me and the participants seemed to make the female construction workers sympathetic to me, and which eventually directed the participants to express desire to help me in any possible way they could.

Although female construction workers work outside with men for payment, conversations with them reveal that their husbands do not feel entirely comfortable in allowing them to mingle with unfamiliar males. When I went to talk to them, it seemed my gendered identity as a woman made the process easier. Even a few of my participants reported that their husbands said "she is a woman. It is not a problem if you talk to her. Go and see what she says". Consequently, the husbands were comfortable when I established rapport with their wives (participants of my research). Overall, since the participants in my study received approval from their *sardars* and husbands, they also appeared to be very comfortable to talk to me.



Therefore, I managed to talk to the participants without any major obstacles and in a conversational, informal and casual manner. In addition to my position as an educated, middle-class woman, my position of 'being a married woman' acted as an additional qualification (see Lee 1997). I felt that participants tended to believe that as a married woman I was able to understand their domestic responsibilities, the techniques they employ to deal with different situations, reasons underlying their conjugal conflicts and the ambiguity they suffer through. Usually, in Bangladesh, talking publicly about someone's sexual behaviour or even making comments regarding the decisions of having a baby, taking contraception and so on is considered as shameful conduct. However, married women themselves frequently make fun of each other pointing towards their own situation. Thus, my status of being 'married' made it easier for me to open up discussions regarding these sensitive issues. Reflecting upon my research, I believe, I tried to minimise the power gap between myself and the participants as much as I could. I chatted with them, shared food with them, visited them at their houses and construction sites, encouraged them whenever they said something, spent time with them and satisfied their curiosity regarding my personal life, work and experiences in order to minimise the hierarchy based on relative levels of economic and cultural capital. Because of the friendly informal relationship between us, the participants did not appear to feel the pressure that may arise from being interviewed. Rather it was always a lively, informal and friendly discussion about diverse issues of everyday life. This even extended to them actively trying to help me, through for example, ensuring that I clearly understood what they were saying when I was taking notes.

All the information generated through the life histories was documented. If further clarification was required, I had further long conversations with the same participant. Notes were taken and communication continued until I was convinced about my understanding of the data. Since the majority of the participants in my study were unschooled, they sometimes were unable to provide consistent information regarding numerical issues, for instance their own age, children's age, duration of conjugal life, duration of paid work etc. In Bangladesh, birth, death, and marriage are not regularly registered and poorer people generally do not celebrate birthdays or anniversaries (Chowdhury 2000; also see Gardner 2008). Therefore, people can find it very hard to recall when they were born, or married, or migrated. I tried to obtain accurate data by

relating the participants' experiences with collective issues such as war of independence, party in power etc. However, Kakuru and Paradza's (2007:289-290), field experience highlighted that such collective events 'carried very limited meaning to individuals'. Instead of collective events, individuals structured their memories and explained things relating to their own personal circumstances. Women generally include family events such as death of the participant's husband or immediate family member, birth of children, participant's own or children's marriage, and events that had directly impacted on a participant's own or family's misfortune or well-being. I found this to be the case for my female participants.

As mentioned before, after conducting ethnographic research with female construction workers, I became more interested in getting acquainted with the different facets of their lives. In order to explore female construction workers' lived experiences in an extensive way it was imperative to investigate the day-to-day experiences of other people who are closely related to them and thus impacting on their lives in many ways. Consequently, in this research, I intended to research men vis-à-vis women. Letherby (2003) pointed out that in order to fully understand women's lives in a patriarchal society, researchers also need to have a proper understanding of the experiences and perceptions of men. Kelly et al. (1994) also presume that the perspectives of both men and women need to be explored in order to address women's oppression and put it in context. Hence, to supplement women's narratives, gain men's perspectives and attain a wider representation of women's lived experiences, I aimed to incorporate men in this study. I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with husbands of female construction workers to obtain an insight about their views regarding masculinity, femininity and women's work in general and their wives' work in particular. I also carried out in-depth semi-structured interviews with male construction workers to gain a better understanding about female construction workers' workplace experiences and men's perceptions about women's presence in the 'male sphere'.

### **Researching men: glimpses from the fieldwork**

Conducting research with men as a female researcher in a patriarchal society like Bangladesh is quite an intricate task, though not impossible. When I went to talk to the

men, I found it difficult to approach them directly. In Bangladeshi society, it is considered socially unacceptable for a woman to initiate a conversation with an unfamiliar man. Maybe this is why when I approached (after talking to the gatekeeper) a male construction worker at Amberkhana point to talk to him, he seemed hesitant and unenthusiastic about talking to me. As I did not want to make him talk if he was not willing, I almost gave up on including him in the study. However, his wife, who was present at the time of this exchange (being employed as a construction worker), took on the role of a negotiator and encouraged him to talk to me. This situation provided me with the understanding that gaining access to married men via their wives would be easier. This assumption is supported by Kilkey's research (2010), where she also successfully recruited male participants by approaching their female partners first.

Although the first man I approached agreed to talk to me on the basis of his wife's insistence, he relaxed as the interview progressed. The conversation went fine. He explained that he did not initially wish to talk to me because he thought I worked for an NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation) where (in the supposed office of that NGO) people (NGO activists) forcibly sterilise poor men and women, or persuade them to adopt permanent birth control measures. When I pointed out that I had already made it clear to him what the intention behind my approach was, he responded that "these people (NGO activists) also speak softly like you. I have experience, NGO people approached me before. This is why I became suspicious about you". After talking to me this participant introduced me to another male construction worker, and this time he assured that man that he could come and talk to me as I am not going to cause any harm to him.

Jeff Hearn (1998:48) draws our attention to the argument that 'two hours is a reasonable time limit for interviewing a man and beyond that, men's patience might be exceeded'. Although this contention may hold validity regardless of the gender of the participants, I found it to resonate particularly with my experiences of interviewing men. For instance, one male participant seemed particularly impatient, wanting to finish our exchange quickly. However, it appeared to me that this participant's status of being a 'single' man made him feel reticent in talking about women with a female and that might be one of the reasons behind his edginess. It is worth mentioning here that I experienced such edginess only among two of my male participants and also only in the first meetings.

When subsequent meetings (planned/ unplanned) took place with them in different places (e.g., construction sites, congregating points) and we became more familiar, it appeared to me that the nervousness also faded which effectively facilitated us to make longer conversations. Though Hearn (1998) revealed that long conversations may cause intolerance among participant men, he also made us aware that given the difficulties of arranging a meeting it is better to complete as much as we can in one setting. Following his advice, I tried to discuss as many issues as I could with the male participants in one meeting.

Lee (1997:554) in her article proposed that an interviewer's 'vulnerability' should receive due attention in discussions of 'woman-to-man interviewing'. She further elaborated this by suggesting that researchers making home visits to carry out interviews or interviewing on a one-to-one basis in a private place 'might not be an entirely safe proposition'. Hearn (1998) was also in favour of avoiding the possibility of interviewing men in their own home primarily because of concerns associated with the safety of the interviewer. Understanding Lee (1997) and Hearn's (1998) concerns I also considered it a high risk strategy to conduct a one-to-one interview with an unknown man. This is particularly so in the context of Bangladesh, where a vast majority of the men are not accustomed to talking to an unfamiliar woman, and so I supposed the risks might be even higher. Friendship between a man and a woman in Bangladesh is still predominantly a middle and upper-class phenomenon.

Although I interviewed male construction workers, I did not try to socialise with them in their workplace or the points where they congregate to be hired (by an agency or individual), because socialising with unknown men (construction workers) in a public place could effectively tarnish my image as a culturally defined 'respectful' woman (see Lee 1997). Congregating points are not separate places, rather all three congregating points I selected for research are busy intersections of Sylhet city and the workers would wait on the pavements and streets for the potential recruiters to recruit them. Especially Amberkhana point intersects all important establishments of the city such as, the university, court, main shopping places, airport, train and bus stations, major schools and colleges of the city and residential areas. As I mentioned already I, too, am from Sylhet and it is relatively a small city; my family's and friends' routes also transect the congregating points and it was very possible that they might have seen me socialising

with construction workers in the congregating points and wondered what I was doing there. It was not possible for me to explain my situation to everyone and also to make them understand what I was actually doing in congregating points; this concern also raised different issues. Momsen (2010) pointed out that people who are not used to seeing females in a public place (in this case a middle-class woman researcher) may often believe that a woman visible in public places is sexually available. Since I did not want to jeopardise my reputation, I had to remain aware of my behaviour, even as a researcher. Thus, in the process of talking to men I was careful about my own reputation and security at all times. I arranged meetings with my male participants in a place which was both known to me and where we could talk without interruption. Moreover, I ensured that there were people around to support me in case of necessity.

Although I provided them with tea and snacks, I did not have lunch or dinner with my male participants. In the event of researching female construction workers, I tried to break the hierarchies as much as I could between me and the participants of my study. On the other hand, I did not try to eliminate the socially ascribed distance between male participants and me. Rather, I maintained this distance as a technique to refrain from providing the impression that I was overfriendly and by extension, that my intentions could be misinterpreted, which may lead to inappropriate (sexual) behaviour. Following McKee and O'Brien's (1983:158) advice to maintain a 'professional manner', in most cases I tried to behave like a serious person with the appropriate mix of friendliness and orientation to the research. Maybe this is why the participants also did not ask me personal questions, and all their queries were limited to my work which was comforting for me to a great extent, given the above discussion.

Smart (1984) pointed out that 'female interviewers may feel constrained not to jeopardise the interview by challenging sexist comments made by interviewees' (cited in Lee 1997:559-560), and at the point of interviewing men, I went through similar experiences. One participant, for example, made a comment "women are like shoes. They should remain under feet". Being a woman it was very difficult for me to put up with such a chauvinistic comment, nevertheless, I did not challenge him directly. Throughout all 20 interviews I conducted, I had to listen to sexist comments as we discussed household divisions of labour, division of labour in the workplace, women's paid employment and women's contribution to the households, equality between men

and women and other pertinent issues. Instead of challenging these participant males' chauvinistic attitudes, I tactfully tried to highlight women's achievements and contributions. From these experiences I have learned how it was sometimes possible to keep the interview going while also overtly not agreeing or disagreeing with the comments made by a participant (see Smart 1984).

Arendell (1997) found herself in an ambiguous position while interviewing men. She discovered that, although the majority of the male participants were critical of women in many respects, these men unveiled their experiences and feelings to her emphatically and meticulously only because she was a woman. Arendell's observation was also supported by McKee and O'Brien's (1983) research. However, in this respect my own experience of conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with men reveals that, the extent to which a participant is going to divulge his or her story to the researcher not only depends on the researcher's gender, but also on the position of the participant. I spoke to 6 single men and 14 married men and my experience provided me with the understanding that in the context of Bangladesh where unattached men and women usually do not mingle very freely, single and young men sometimes find it a bit embarrassing to communicate with a woman. However, my own subject position as a middle-class, educated woman is also likely to have had an impact on their behaviour. I also noticed that my position as a married woman acted as a catalyst to make things easier in our discussion regarding marriage, conjugal conflict, status of women in general and wives in particular.

In Bangladesh women's age and position in the life cycle have a direct bearing upon her mobility (Chowdhury 2000). In congruence with this assumption I discovered that my position as a married woman helped me to convince my family members regarding the nature of my work and subsequently lessen many restrictions on my own mobility. Maybe it is worth mentioning here that my mobility is, however, not restricted to the same extent as many other women in Bangladesh because of my background as an educated, middle-class woman who is engaged in full-time paid employment. Yet, it is no use denying the fact that, given the security constraints and prevailing social norms of the society, women's mobility is restricted to some extent irrespective of their position.

**Present research project**

The adoption of different qualitative techniques such as life histories, in-depth semi-structured interviews and observation facilitated the exploration and analysis of women's and men's experiences. According to Letherby (2003:84) many researchers advocate the participative use of qualitative in-depth interviews as they find it fits especially with feminist goals; for example, in terms of the development of an approach which is grounded in the experience of women. Proponents of this view also deem qualitative methods 'give voice' to women participants and in many ways accrues them the power to determine the direction and focus of research (DeVault 1999; Clisby and Holdsworth 2014). Life history research is generally perceived to be an emancipatory and empowering method (Peacock and Holland 1993; Anderson and Jack 1991). Hence, life histories are particularly useful for feminist research as they offer us detailed accounts of women's experiences (Letherby 2003; Clisby and Holdsworth 2014). Similarly, in-depth semi-structured interviews, which are widely used in qualitative research, offer the researcher an in-depth understanding of social and personal issues, and bestow the participants with the opportunity to articulate their views in their own terms (Johnson 2001). I thus preferred in-depth semi-structured interviews for my purpose. Although the life histories and in-depth semi-structured interviews were the major sources of data in the study, other ethnographic methods of data collection, such as observation and informal conversations with the people involved in construction work and construction sites were employed to gain a better understanding of generated data. Observation is useful for some questions; for example, apart from self-reports, questions such as age of the participant, living standard, food intake, gender relations in home and workplace, freedom of mingling with people, work atmosphere, gender divisions of labour and workload can effectively be verified by observation. I maintained a diary and took fieldnotes (Sanjek 1990). Photographs were taken because the participants gave their unconstrained consent. Photographs are helpful both in terms of facilitating the readers to visualise the context, and for reviving the researcher's memory of his/her fieldwork days (see Fetterman 1998).

Besides employing different qualitative methods (primary data analysis), in order to understand the construction of masculinity and femininity in contemporary Bangladesh and to gain a comprehensive perspective as to whether there is any change in gender

relations in both family and workplace of the female construction workers, relevant literature and earlier research were reviewed (secondary data analysis) regarding the status of women in Bangladesh.

Hammersley and Atkinson (1997) believe that when a researcher is too familiar with the cultural practices of the participants of the study, (s)he may not be able to investigate different socio-cultural practices as they may appear to the researcher as 'natural'. This danger of taking things for granted on the part of the researcher can effectively limit the potential of critical and analytical standpoints. Ethnographic texts usually consider the research field as a place that existed separate from the researcher's own home or academic spheres where the researcher learns from 'others'. However, this is no longer the case and a great deal of ethnographic research now takes place close to home (Clifford 1997). Thus I did not hesitate to select my home town as my research field. I was well located as I knew the place and aware of the importance and significance of different congregating points and construction sites. However, I acknowledge that throughout the research process it remained a challenge for me to be reflective and not to take things for granted.

### **Power relations, ethical issues and reflexivity**

Given that one of the key dimensions of feminist research is breaking down of power hierarchies between the researcher and the participant of the research, I tried to keep the researcher-participant relationships as equal, non-hierarchical and reciprocal as possible. However, I admit the fact that it is not possible to eliminate the differences altogether, and such a stance is considered naive by many feminist researchers, who argue for an acknowledgement of power and differences between women (Kelly et al. 1994; Letherby 2003). Glucksmann (1994) claims it is simply impossible to overcome the structured inequalities between women within the research process. Notwithstanding, I tried all those techniques described earlier, to lessen the hierarchy between myself and the participant female construction workers of my study. It is also important to recognise that differently situated women also possess different forms of power and hierarchies of power and agency between researcher and participant are complex and not uni-directional.



It is often argued that the people to be studied by social researchers should be well informed about the research, and should give their unconstrained consent formally or informally (Hammersley and Atkinson 1997; Fetterman 1998). Both the Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA) and British Sociological Association (BSA) ethical guidelines suggest researchers gain the informed consent of the people studied. ‘Participants also should be provided with adequate information on what is being done to them, the limits to their participation, as well as any potential risks they may incur by taking part in research’ (Sin 2005:279). Following these guidelines, I also tried to explain my purpose as elaborately as possible to the participants of my research and sought their consent. However, seeking or giving consent is not a one time process that takes place only before the research. Rather, it is suggested that a researcher should seek consent throughout the entire research process (Sin 2005).

I maintained confidentiality and thus pseudonyms were used to protect the participants’ privacy. The participants were well informed about my motives and the uses of the information they provided. Participants were also given the opportunity to withdraw part or all of the information they provided in interviews. Although I endeavoured to ensure that ethical issues such as confidentiality are adhered to, it is acknowledged that within close knit communities, the participants might discuss the interview process amongst themselves. This was largely unavoidable but all reasonable steps (via recognised academic regulations) were put in place, to ensure I maintain this as a researcher.

At the end of my research, I talked to my participants about the major themes that emerged from the interviews and my day-to-day observations of their lives in congregating points, construction sites and their respective home environment. Prior to the completion of the thesis I disseminated my early findings to my participants. As the vast majority of my participants were unschooled and not able to read or write, it was not useful to disseminate research findings in written forms so we opted for verbal discussions. These conversations took place both in small groups and also at an individual level and I asked them whether they thought it was an accurate representation of what they said or what they experienced. I sat down with my participants and asked them whether they wanted their pictures to be added in my thesis. Since my participants

wanted so, they were given the choice over which pictures they wanted me to include. My participants selected their pictures and wanted to see their photographs with their life histories. They wanted people to see them and read their stories. As I mentioned earlier, the women themselves actually were unable to read their life histories given their lack of literacy skills. They were relying on me and trusting me and I ethically felt that I could not post their pictures alongside their vignettes in my thesis as most of them had quite harrowing life histories. So eventually I opted for a middle ground. I posted women's pictures but not alongside their vignettes, by doing this I made sure that their pictures are included in the thesis but the women are not identifiable. Before leaving the field, as a way to say thank you to the participants, I brought food for them to the construction sites and gave them their photos, (those I captured during my fieldwork phase). It is in my mind, after finishing my thesis when I go back home, to produce a small pamphlet with photographs and quotes of my participants, major issues and a key summary of my research. I am planning to give my participants this pamphlet in order for them to have a tangible record of their participation in my research. It is entirely up to them what they do with this pamphlet; they can keep it as a memory or destroy it as many women find it shameful to work as a construction worker. I however would convey the message through this pamphlet that I value their work, their labour, and also their contribution to my research.

### **Conclusion**

Embarking on an extensive research project is not an easy task and it evokes personal concerns over whether I am able to do justice to the particular study. However, presumably every study has its own drawbacks and strengths. I believe a major strength of this research is the aspiration of excavating a particular group of people's experiences by employing a wide range of primary data generation techniques which best fit both ethnographic and feminist methodological frameworks under the broader framework of qualitative research. Although women were at the centre of this research, I sought to unearth the perceptions of men in order to have a better understanding of women's experiences and situation in the wider societal context which was another strength of this study.

Conducting research on men as a female researcher in a patriarchal society like Bangladesh is difficult. However, my previous experience of studying female construction workers boosted my confidence and equipped me with diverse skills to handle different situations to successfully conduct the interviews with male participants. In sum, I believe the use of a wide range of qualitative methods such as life history interviews, in-depth semi-structured interviews, ethnographic observations, and informal conversations enabled me to construct and represent the experiences of people under study in their own terms whilst remaining attentive to the ethical issues involved.

## **Chapter IV: Movement, transition, power and labour: life history narratives of selected participants**

Women constitute nearly half (49%) of the population of Bangladesh, nevertheless their visible presence in the economic realm was notably absent even a couple of decades ago (Kabeer 2000). The social norms of Bangladeshi society continue to strongly favour the existing system of the male breadwinner and women dependent on men for their maintenance. Thus, in congruence with the societal expectation women's presence in paid employment outside the home and their independent movement for economic pursuit have been considerably low until relatively recently (Afsar 2003). As mentioned in previous chapters, things have, however, started to change over the last couple of decades as widespread poverty pushed a vast majority of women into paid employment in the public sphere. Taking paid employment outside the home effectively increases the likelihood that women would meet non-kin men more frequently and may not be able to observe *purdah* in a stricter sense, which is perceived as a status marker by many (Karim 2008). Although women from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds were able to limit their contact with the public sphere to adhere to *purdah* norms by not taking paid employment, if they so wished women of poorer households did not have this option. Maintaining strict *purdah* has been a luxury for many of them. Women of poorer households in Bangladesh have always been economically active (Gardner 1995b) and involved in a range of productive activities, for instance, growing vegetables in the kitchen garden, raising poultry and/or cattle, taking part in post-harvest activities both inside and outside the home, collecting firewood and fodder from the neighbourhood and so on. They always make an immense contribution to their household economy through these activities but this goes largely unnoticed and tends not to be considered as 'work' since it is not calculated in monetary terms.

As I mentioned in Chapter II, during the second half of 1970s, a time when globally women's issues received increasing attention from different segments, as a response the Bangladeshi government also took important measures to incorporate women into the visibly productive economy. During this period the government, 'embarked on a programme of economic development. This included the rehabilitation of the private sector and a waiving of duty on imported fabrics destined for the manufacture of export-oriented garments, laying the foundation for today's vast garment sector' (Gardner

2012:66). In the 1970s population control also became an important agenda for the international donor agencies. In Bangladesh this project earned huge popularity at the government level and subsequently it created jobs in the health sector for a good number of middle and lower middle-class women, especially in the rural areas in Bangladesh. In addition to the health sector, the government's policy to reserve a quota for women in primary school teaching also facilitated women's paid employment in governmental and semi-governmental organisations (Feldman 2001). Women of the poorer households who were not suitable for such employment opportunities due to a lack of formal educational attainment, found jobs in 'food for work' projects mostly taking place in rural areas. Women became involved in work in the more public realm, particularly those women involved in the food for work project. Some of these women worked on projects, for instance, road construction (Hossain et al. 1988; Feldman 2001).

In the 1980s, both economic impoverishment and new opportunities for women's employment in world market factories pushed a large number of women into the more public sphere of waged employment for the first time in the history of the country (Kabeer 2000). Since the late 1980s, the number of women in the labour market has been increasing. At the beginning of the 1990s a large number of women started taking up waged work in heavily male dominated sectors, such as construction (Ward et al. 2004). In construction work they were required to mingle and negotiate with unfamiliar men in open spaces, which was a novel phenomenon in the context of Bangladesh. The accounts of my participants, which I am going to elaborate in subsequent chapters, bear testimony to the fact.

Since the early 1990s a large number of female workers started to become visible on construction sites (Ahsan 1997). Over the last two decades the number of women joining the construction sector continued to proliferate and as a consequence at present this sector has emerged as one of the significant employers of female labourers. In Bangladesh 1.5 million people were engaged in the construction sector in 2005-2006, according to the 2010 Labour Force Survey, the number has increased to 2.6 million workers. While 9.7 million women were involved in the informal sector in 2005-06, the 2010 survey records 14.9 million women's involvement in the informal sectors, which suggests the increasing trend of participation of female labourers in the informal sector such as construction (see BBS 2011). As mentioned in Chapter II and also in this

Chapter, in the 1980s women's greater presence in the public domain through their employment in world market factories efficiently removed many socio-cultural and ideological barriers from women's independent migration and entrance into paid employment. It also hugely contributed to shaping people's perceptions about shame and honour, and boosted women's confidence to seek paid employment even in unconventional sectors, such as construction. In the 1970s and early 1980s poorer women who took paid employment in more public domain (e.g., road construction) faced severe criticism and stricter social sanctions from wider society as women's presence in the public sphere was yet a less familiar experience. As mentioned by Kabeer (1994), women's presence in construction work initially drew negative attention; I am aware that women's employment in heavily male dominated sectors has not yet been welcomed by people of all social stratas in a uniform way. Nevertheless, women's engagement in such sectors has definitely contributed to the increase of tolerance among people about their (women's) presence in the public sphere, at least in urban areas: the continuous inflow of female workers in the construction sector bears testimony to this fact. By entering into the construction sector in a massive number, women are pushing the boundaries of existing gender relations/discourse. Abu-Lughod's (1990:43) study on Bedouin women reveals that women use different unconventional forms of resistance, such as defying different types of restrictions impinged on them by the elderly community men. Drawing on Abu-Lughod I argue that women those who migrated without male guardians, those who entered into male dominated construction work and those who continued with paid employment in the construction sector in the midst of husbands' displeasure, they all used different forms of resistance. I also contest that this is obviously a step forward to achieving greater gender equality.

The female labour force in the construction sector is by no means a homogeneous group in terms of demographic characteristics. In order to obtain a broader picture of female construction workers' experiences my study incorporated women who belonged to different age categories, ranging from early 20s to mid-50s. The majority of the participants, however, were unschooled and they only had an approximate idea of their age. Like their female counterparts, male construction workers of this study were also a group consisting of people of different age cohorts, between the ages of 17 and 56.

Of the 40 female participants, 24 of them were married and among these married women approximately 70% lived in households that were perceived as conventionally structured, headed by husbands. Four of the married participants' husbands had been living in their village homes. Three other participants' husbands had been living with their first/second wives, though they visited them (participants) time to time. Married participants' husbands, who had not been living with them, nevertheless had been able to maintain substantial control over the lives of their wives. Seven of the participants were widowed and rest of them were either separated from or deserted by their husbands. The women who were separated, widowed, deserted and who moved away without their husbands assumed the responsibility of household headship after the demise or departure of their husbands. Nearly all the participants had been married in their teens and said they had no voice in the process of decision making regarding their first marriage. Among the 20 male participants 14 of them were married, 5 were single and 1 was separated. All of them were from similar poor socioeconomic backgrounds as detailed below with few exceptions. Only a tiny number of female participants had been to school, but did not finish primary level, while more than half of the male participants had been to high school, but dropped out before finishing their studies (see table 1).

Of all female participants, 38 of them had children and the number of living children ranged from 1 to 6. In this study I found that taking care of children was almost exclusively a female responsibility. Women who were widowed, separated or deserted, were solely responsible for their children's well-being. They relied chiefly on their older children to take care of younger children. I observed that irrespective of the gender of the older children, practically they were liable for taking care of younger siblings. Those who were lucky, for example Begum, could leave their children with their mothers. Others, for example Naju, who did not have anyone else on whom to depend, were obliged to take their children to the workplace. A few participants, for instance, Rina and Afia, mentioned occasional help with child care from women of their neighbourhoods in difficult times. Rina, Naju, Sheba and many others, who were deserted by their husbands, never received (especially after desertion) any monetary or other forms of help in child rearing and caring from their husbands. Similar to the widowed, separated and deserted women, married women were also seen to be dependent on their children to take care of younger ones in the absence of any substantial support on the part of their husbands. A small number of women received

support from other female members of their extended families, for instance, Amena's mother and Bilkiss' mother-in-law had been living with them to take care of their children in their absence. Of those men who participated in childcare, their participation was largely limited to helping the young children to collect water for bathing from the neighbourhood, occasionally supervising their studies and disciplining them when they get involved in fights with the children in the neighbourhood. However, men's small contributions tended to be overtly acknowledged by their wives with greater appreciation. I did not, however, see a great deal of commitment on the part of men to share childcare responsibilities.

Chowdhury (2000) observed that, in stark contrast to the popular belief that in patriarchal societies families tend to be extended in nature, a vast majority of Bangladeshi households are nuclear. In accordance with this observation, I found that only 3 of my married participants (Amena, Bilkiss and Sajeda) lived with their in-laws or parents. A great majority of my participants belonged to a nuclear family either headed by a female or a male (see table 1). Before migrating to Sylhet some of them potentially had been a part of a joint family. Spouses of both male and female participants who had not migrated to Sylhet, a great majority of them had been living with their unmarried children in their village homes. Prevailing social norms of Bangladesh prefer and attach high esteem to joint living; however, the harsh economic reality had, for practical reasons, forced family members to terminate joint living. When acute poverty at household level needs every member to earn his/her livelihood and earning an income becomes difficult, it is more likely that people who are able to earn some money will be less interested to share it with other members who are unable to earn or earn significantly less.

The majority of my participants were migrants from rural areas and were from different parts of Bangladesh, while a small number were either born and brought up, or raised, in urban slums. There was a pattern observed in terms of the economic activities of the female construction workers prior to joining construction work. Most of my female participants worked as domestic helpers after they had migrated, and subsequently joined construction work, while 2 of them worked as wage labourers even before migration. The majority of them, however, had not been employed before migrating to Sylhet as in rural areas women's paid work in the public sphere is deemed to have a



negative reflection on the family's honour. My study suggests that migrating to a new socio-cultural environment and economic hardship contributed to the change of people's perceptions regarding women's paid employment. Migration to a new social setting though posing many new challenges, it also, to some extent, offers some relief to the migrants, for instance, they seldom face social disapproval in taking up unusual forms of employment which might not have been the case in their familiar environment. I will explore this issue in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

Most of the participants' families were from the impoverished, landless segments of rural Bangladesh. Their families' income levels were low, the principal breadwinners were engaged with manual labour (e.g., wage labourers, rikshaw pullers) and their levels of education were also very low. The bulk of women I spoke with arrived in Sylhet with the specific intent of joining the workforce. Others had migrated into the city with their husbands and only after arriving in the city had they decided to join the labour force. Independent migration on the part of women has not been widespread in the Bangladeshi context until recently; against this backdrop, the study reveals a total of 17 female participants who had migrated without a male guardian. Four of the married participants had also migrated leaving their husbands back in the rural home. Some of the women, who had migrated on their own, did not even have the money to finance their trip to Sylhet. Their extended family members or friends supported them by bearing the expenses. However, a small number of them had to borrow money from credit agencies or acquaintances, with high interest, to bear the travel costs to Sylhet. Female participants predominantly migrated with other women of their home villages, male participants were reported to migrate with male relatives or acquaintances from rural villages (see table 1).

It seems the entry of these women into the public domain in search of paid work was directly associated with serious economic need. Based on the root causes of their financial hardship and subsequent entry in construction work, I have grouped these women in four broad categories. The first group of women had been pushed for the first time into paid work by sudden adversity such as, the death of the previous breadwinner and/or desertion by their husbands. A second group had to take up the role of a primary breadwinner of the family even in the presence of their husbands as the men turned out to be inconsistent and unreliable earners. Women of this group were mired in a troubled

situation in the private sphere as they felt they were simultaneously discharging financial responsibilities and negotiating with inconsiderate and irresponsible 'masculine men'. A third group of women joined construction work because their husbands were unable to ensure their livelihood; aging, weakness, illness, lack of intelligence of the men, and large family size were the main reasons given for their incapacity. Women of this group seemed to be more sympathetic towards the problems of their husbands and their lack of financial provision. The last group comprised of a small number of women who had been propelled to construction work predominantly to repay the loan of credit agencies. Although the participants borrowed money to meet some household demands, their husbands did not extend financial help to repay the loans as they were not formally responsible for this. So the women themselves were required to do something to earn money to repay their loans.

Construction work simply represented a preferred form of employment, because it was considered a higher paid form of employment in comparison to domestic work which was virtually the only other alternative open to these women in their socioeconomic, educational and class position. As mentioned previously, Women are able to enter and exit the construction sector with relative ease because in most cases they are 'unskilled' *jogalis*, a type of work which does not require formal education. This flexible nature of the construction sector also attracted most women engaged in this work, this finding concurs with that noted by my own (Choudhury 2013) and other studies of the construction industry (e.g., Desai 2003; Bharara et al. 2012).

There were, thus, a variety of circumstances which led to women's entry into construction work, including abject poverty, inability of the principal breadwinner to discharge their responsibilities, irresponsible behaviour on the part of the primary breadwinner, personal circumstances, pressure from lending organisations to repay loans and absence of an alternative and reliable breadwinner. For participant male construction workers the reasons for joining this sector were poverty, lack of availability of a better paid job with their levels of education, easy entrance to this sector and the influence of the contact person (who helped them to migrate and settle down in the place of destination). Although apparently a vast majority of married female participants were from dual earner families where either both the partners were working as construction workers or the husbands were engaged in other forms of

manual labour, in almost all of the cases the participant women were primarily responsible for ensuring their livelihood. Among the male participants 5 were married to female construction workers and 1 was married to a domestic helper; the rest of the married male participants' wives were stay-at-home wives.

It was difficult to obtain the monthly income figures for construction workers regardless of their gender identity because the wage varies for both depending on the nature of work they perform on each occasion and the number of days they work in a month. The monthly income of female workers roughly ranged from Tk<sup>5</sup> 1,400 - 4,000 (£10.5 - 31), while male construction workers' monthly income varied from Tk 2,500 - 10,000 (£20 - 75). The majority of female participants reported experiencing chronic hunger and lack of fulfilment in basic needs including clothes and medicine before joining the workforce. Although female construction workers clearly earn significantly less in comparison to their male counterparts, after joining the workforce most of them came out of chronic starvation and were able to fulfil at least some of their basic needs; they also reported that they rarely starved and were able to buy clothes and cheap consumer goods, a few of them repaid loans and even bought a small piece of land which reflects their material well-being in comparison to their past.

Of the 40 life histories with women and 20 in-depth interviews with men, I have selected 10 of the participants' vignettes both to create an overview of their lives and to demonstrate the commonality of some of their experiences. Although all the participants have different histories, and some have different experiences, these 10 nevertheless expose more common patterns. Other voices which diverge from the aforementioned patterns are not excluded; all participants are quoted in subsequent chapters, but this chapter is devoted to articulating 10 summary histories. The following vignettes are related from the perspectives of the participants themselves. As mentioned in chapter III, I initially granted my participants their wishes to have their photographs placed next to their vignettes. But I was in a dilemma whether to keep their pictures alongside their stories. I added my participants' photographs with their vignettes and took them back. After much reflection however, I decided that as a researcher I had a duty to prioritise the safeguarding of their identities. As such, I placed photographs- most of which

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<sup>5</sup> £1 is equivalent to 130 taka (Tk) in March 2014

featured groups of women rather than individual women- in my thesis, thereby protecting their identities.

Table 1: Profile of participants at a glance

Name	Age and gender	Marital Status	Years of schooling	Place of origin	Migration History	Household composition and earning members
Noorjahan	34 Female	Married	0	Mymensing	Poverty was the main reason given for migration. Migrated with husband	Nuclear family. Living with husband and 5 unmarried children. Her elder daughter was working as a domestic help to contribute to the family. Noorjahan was the principal earner; her husband was not working.
Olifa	24 Female	Married	0	Sylhet	Her parents migrated to Sylhet before she was born.	Nuclear family. Living with husband and 4 young children. Her husband worked as a rikshaw puller; they both contributed to run the family.
Sheba	28 Female	Deserted by husband	0	Sunamgonj	Poverty was the main reason given for migration. Migrated with husband.	Nuclear family. She was living with 4 young children. She worked to earn the family expenses.
Kanchon	36 Female	Married	0	Sylhet	(Born in Sylhet)	She was living with her 2 <sup>nd</sup> husband and only son from her 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage. She was the principal earner. Her husband was an irregular earner and less willing to contribute to the household.
Mahmuda	35 Female	Married	0	Sunamgonj	Poverty was the main reason given for migration. Migrated with husband.	Nuclear family. Living with husband and 6 unmarried daughters. She was the breadwinner; husband

						was not working.
Naju	21 Female	Deserted by husband	4	Companygonj, Sylhet	Migrated with husband to live with him.	Nuclear family. Living with 2 young children. She was the breadwinner.
Rokeya	43 Female	Married	0	Netrokona, Mymensingh	Poverty was the main reason given for migration. Migrated with husband.	Nuclear family. Living with husband and 4 unmarried children. She was the breadwinner; her husband worked only occasionally.
Rehena	46 Female	Married	0	Hobigonj	Poverty and conflicts with husband's brothers were the reasons for migration. Migrated with husband and children.	Nuclear family. Living with husband. She was the breadwinner; her husband was not able to work due to illness.
Rabu	33 Female	Widowed	0	Kishorgonj	Poverty faced after husband's sudden death was the reason for migration. Migrated with children.	Nuclear family. Living with 3 unmarried children. She was the breadwinner.
Aleya	35 Female	Married	2	Hobigonj	Poverty was the reason given for migration. Migrated with husband and children.	Nuclear family. Living with 5 unmarried children. Her husband worked as a rikshaw puller and they both contributed to the family financially.
Ayesha	53 Female	Widowed	0	Hobigonj	Unavailability of a reliable earner and conflicts with husband's brothers were the reasons for migrating to Sylhet. Migrated with unmarried daughters after husband's	Nuclear family. Living with 2 unmarried daughters. She was the breadwinner.

					death.	
Minara	28 Female	Married	2	Sunamgonj	Mother's remarriage after the death of father was the reason given for migration. Migrated with a female neighbour.	Nuclear family. Living with husband and 4 young children. She was the breadwinner. Her husband was less interested in physical labour.
Mina	42 Female	Married	0	BrahminBaria	Poverty was the reason given for migration. Migrated with husband and children.	Nuclear family. Living with husband and 3 young children. She and her husband both were working as construction workers to earn a living for the family.
Fuleza	33 Female	Married	3	Hobigonj	Conjugal conflicts were the reasons given for migration. Migrated with children with the help of a male cousin.	Living with only son from her 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage. Her 2 <sup>nd</sup> husband visited her time to time. Her daughters worked as domestic helpers to earn their living. She was the breadwinner; her husband occasionally contributed to her household. She also sometimes supported her husband financially.
Jaheda	29 Female	Married	0	Comilla	Natural calamities and poverty were the reasons given for migration. Migrated with husband and children on the advice of her husband's female cousin.	Nuclear family. Living with husband and 4 young children. She and her husband both worked as construction workers to contribute to the household.
Begum	33 Female	Widowed	0	Hobigonj	Conjugal conflicts and repay credit agency's money were the reasons	Living as a paying guest with a family known through her brother. Her unmarried daughters lived with

					given for migration. Migrated with children with the help of a woman of her village.	her mother in their village home. She earned for herself and her daughters.
Muleda	35 Female	Married	0	Mymensingh	Taking care of her son (who migrated to join construction work) was the reason given for migration. Migrated with son.	She lived with her unmarried son in Sylhet. Her husband and other unmarried children lived in their village home. She and her son worked as construction workers to earn for the whole family.
Bilkiss	27 Female	Married	0	Mymensingh	Poverty was the reason given for migration. Migrated with husband.	Extended family. Living with husband, 2 young children and parents-in-law. She was the principal earner. Her husband did not work regularly.
Afia	34 Female	Married	0	Sunamgonj	Searching for a job was the reason given for migration. Migrated with husband.	Nuclear family. Living with her 2 <sup>nd</sup> husband and 5 young children. Her husband sometimes lived with his other wife. She was the principal earner. Her husband worked only occasionally and his earnings were too little to maintain two separate households.
Ambia	34 Female	Married	0	Hobigonj	Poverty was the reason given for migration. Migrated with husband.	Nuclear family. Living with husband and 6 young children. Her husband worked as a rikshaw puller. He also contributed to the family.
Morzina	32 Female	Married	2	Sunamgonj	Poverty and Conjugal conflicts were the reasons	Nuclear family. Living with husband and 4 young



					given for migration. Migrated to Sylhet with her mother.	children. She was the principal earner. Her husband was less interested in paid employment.
Amena	23 Female	Married	4	Tangail	Conflict with her father was the reason given for migration. She migrated with her mother with the help of a woman of their village.	Extended family. She lived with her mother, husband and 2 children. Her husband occasionally worked as a carpenter, but she was the principal earner.
Swapna	38 Female	Deserted by husband	0	Mymensingh	Poverty was the reason given for migration. She migrated with her parents as a young girl.	Living on her own after the death of her parents. She earned her living.
Razia	27 Female	Separated from husband	5	Kustia	Searching for an employment and live an independent life were the reasons given for migration. Migrated to Sylhet with father as a young girl, than she went to Dhaka to live with her husband after marriage. After marital discord, she migrated to Sylhet alone.	Living on her own. She earned her living.
Shaheda	25 Female	Married	4	Kendua, Mymensingh	Searching for a job was the reason given for migration. She migrated to Sylhet with the help of her	She lived with her only child in Sylhet. Her husband lived in their village home with his widowed mother and visited them time to time. Her husband was not able to work

					sister.	regularly due to illness; she was the principal earner.
Piyara	32 Female	Married	0	Sunamgonj	Searching for a job was the reason given for migration. Migrated with husband and children.	Nuclear family. Living with husband and 2 young children. She and her husband both worked as construction workers, but she was the main earner.
Jorina	33 Female	Married	0	Kishorgonj	Poverty was the reason given for migration. She migrated to Sylhet with the help of a woman of her village.	Living on her own. Her husband and 2 young children lived in their village home. She visited them occasionally. Her husband also visited her. She was the principal earner.
Fateha	37 Female	Deserted by husband	0	Mymensingh	Poverty and unavailability of a reliable earner were the reasons given for migration. She migrated to Sylhet with the help of her sister.	Nuclear family. Living with 3 unmarried children. She was the principal earner.
Julfa	38 Female	Widowed	0	Mymensingh	Poverty and lack of employment opportunities in their village were the reasons given for migration. Migrated with husband and children.	Nuclear family. Living with 3 unmarried children, among them 2 are autistic. She was the principal earner.
Nahar	42 Female	Deserted by husband	0	Companygonj, Sylhet	Searching for a job was the reason given for	Nuclear family. Living with 4 unmarried children.

					migration. Migrated with children.	Two of her sons occasionally worked as construction workers; however, she was the main breadwinner.
Aklima	55 Female	Married	0	Mymensingh	Earning some money to repay the debt of the credit agency was the reason given for migration. Migrated with the help of a woman of her village.	She was living alone. Her husband lived in their village home. All her 3 sons had been married and established separate households. She earned her own living.
Sajeda	28 Female	Married	0	Sunamgonj	Mother-in-law's torture and searching for job were the reasons given for migration. Migrated with husband and children.	Extended family. She lived with her husband, 2 young children and mother-in-law. She was the main breadwinner, her husband did not work regularly.
Rekha	42 Female	Widowed	0	Mymensingh	Devastating flood and following starvation were the reasons given for migration. Migrated with husband and children.	Nuclear family. She lived with her 4 young children, 2 of them worked at a tea shop to earn their living. She was the principal earner.
Assia	29 Female	Separated	0	Sunamgonj	Conjugal conflicts and looking for a job were the reasons given for migration. Migrated with a woman of her village.	Nuclear family. She lived with her 4 young children. Her husband visited her time to time. She was the breadwinner.
Rahima	31 Female	Separated	3	Sunamgonj	Conjugal conflicts and searching for an	Nuclear family. She lived with her 4 young children.

					employment were the reasons given for migration. Migrated with a woman of her neighbourhood.	She was the breadwinner.
Feroza	37 Female	Widowed	0	Mymensingh	Living with husband was the reason given for migration. Migrated with husband.	Nuclear family. She lived with her only child. She was the breadwinner.
Coomi	29 Female	Married	0	Sunamgonj	Poverty and the pressure to repay credit agency's loan were the reasons given for migration. Migrated with husband and children.	Nuclear family. She lived with her husband and 4 young children. She was the principal earner. Her husband did not work on a regular basis.
Hasna	28 Female	Married	1	Mymensingh	Poverty and unavailability of a reliable breadwinner were the reasons given for migration. Migrated with husband's sister.	Nuclear family. She lived with her 2 young children. Her husband lived with his 2 <sup>nd</sup> wife and visited her occasionally. She was the principal earner.
Hamida	46 Female	Widowed	0	Sunamgonj	Searching for a job was the reason given for migration. Migrated with the women of her village.	She lived on her own. Her 2 sons were studying in a boarding Madrasa (religious school). She was the principal earner.
Rina	37 Female	Deserted by husband	0	Hobigonj	Living with husband was the reason given for migration. Migrated with husband.	Nuclear family. She lived with her only child. She was the breadwinner.

Munir	23 Male	Single	5	Companygonj, Sylhet	Lack of employment opportunities in his village was the reason given for migration. Migrated with the people of his village.	He lived with his male co-workers and earned his living through construction work.
Roab	47 Male	Married	3	Hobigonj	Natural disaster and following poverty were the reasons given for migration. Migrated with wife.	Nuclear family. He worked as a rikshaw puller and his wife worked as a construction worker. They both contributed to the household.
Rezan	33 Male	Married	10	Gaibandha	Lack of employment opportunities in his village was the reason given for migration. Migrated with the help of his elder brother.	Worked as a construction worker and lived with his male co-workers in Sylhet. His wife lived in their village home. He was the breadwinner; his wife was not involved in paid employment.
Raju	26 Male	Married	8	Khulna	Migrated to Sylhet to make a better future. Migrated with his male cousin who was a construction worker.	Worked as a construction worker and lived with his male co-workers in Sylhet. His wife lived in their village home. He was the breadwinner; his wife was not involved in paid employment.
Nokhal	17 Male	Single	3	Sunamgonj	Poverty was the reason given for migration. Migrated with parents as a young child.	Living with his parents and unmarried siblings. He and his father both were working as construction workers to earn the living for their family.
Monzurul	38 Male	Married	9	Gaibandha	Migrated without any specific intention.	He was a <i>rajmistri</i> ; living with his construction worker friends (male) in

					Migrated with a friend of his village.	Sylhet. His wife was living in their village home with their 2 young children. He was the breadwinner; his wife was not involved in paid employment.
Mahbub	52 Male	Married	10	Barisal	Migrated to Sylhet to find better job opportunities. Migrated with the people of his village on the advice of his brother-in-law.	Nuclear family. Living with his wife and 2 children. He was a rajmistri and a contractor. His wife was not involved in paid employment.
Moinul	37 Male	Married	9	Gaibandha	Migrated to Sylhet to find better job opportunities. Migrated with his uncle.	Working as a rajmistri and living with his male co-workers in Sylhet. His wife was in their village home with their 3 young children. He was the breadwinner; his wife was not involved in paid employment.
Mizan	26 Male	Married	7	Joypurhat	Migrated to Sylhet to find better job opportunities. Migrated with the people of his village.	Working as a construction worker and living with his male co-workers in Sylhet. His wife was in their village home. He was the breadwinner; his wife was not involved in paid employment.
Liton	30 Male	Single	7	Sunamgonj	Migrated to Sylhet to find better job opportunities. Migrated with parents and siblings	Working as a construction worker; living with his parents and unmarried siblings. He was the principal breadwinner.
Khason	41 Male	Married	8	Hobigonj	He came to Sylhet for a short visit with the people	Nuclear family. He was not involved in paid

					of his village, but eventually decided to live in Sylhet.	employment; his wife was working as a construction worker. His wife was the breadwinner.
Kajol	41 Male	Married	6	Kishorgonj	He came to Sylhet to find his wife, who after a conjugal conflict migrated to Sylhet with their young children.	Nuclear family. Living with his wife and young children. He and his wife were working as construction workers. They both contributed to the household.
Joynul	54 Male	Married	4	Mymensingh	Poverty was the reason given for migration. Migrated with wife and young children.	Nuclear family. Living with his wife and unmarried children. He and his wife were working as construction workers. They both contributed to the household.
Kacha	56 Male	Married	0	Sunamgonj	Natural calamities and ensuing poverty were the reasons given for migration. Migrated with wife and unmarried children.	Nuclear family. Living with his wife and unmarried children. He was working as a construction worker. His wife was working as a domestic helper. Two of his daughters were also working as domestic helpers to earn their living and save some money for their dowry (during marriage).
Jamal	26 Male	Single	7	Moulvibazar	Searching for a job was the reason given for migration. Migrated with a man of his village.	Working as a construction worker and living with his friends in Sylhet. He was earning his leaving and sending money to his parents who lived in their village home.
Jalal	24 Male	Married	2	Hobigonj	Searching for a job was the reason given for	Working as a construction worker and living with his male co-workers

					migration. Migrated with his uncle.	in Sylhet. His wife was in their village home with their child. She was not involved in paid employment.
Faruque	39 Male	Single	9	Hobigonj	Lack of employment opportunities in his village was the reason given for migration. Migrated with his friend from the village.	He lived with his male co-workers in Sylhet. He was earning his leaving through construction work and sending money to his parents who were in their village home.
Ayub	43 Male	Married	3	Mymensingh	Poverty was the reason given for migration. Migrated with wife and young children.	Nuclear family. He was living with his wife and unmarried children. He and his wife both were construction workers. They both contributed to the household.
Durud	30 Male	Separated from wife	10	Sunamgonj	Lack of employment opportunity in his village home was the reason given for migration. Migrated with a cousin who was also a construction worker.	He was living with his widowed mother in Sylhet. He was working as a construction worker to earn their living.
Bazlu	41 Male	Married	8	Mymensingh	Exploring better job opportunities was the reason given for migration. Migrated with friends from his village.	Living with his male co-workers in Sylhet. His wife was in their village home with their children, but she visited him in Sylhet frequently. He was the breadwinner; his wife was not involved in paid employment.



**Vignette 1: Rokeya Begum**

Rokeya Begum is around 43 years old. She is from Netrokona (one of the districts of Bangladesh). She never went to school and when she was at school going age, opportunities for girls' education were very limited in the village she lived. Rokeya got married at the age of 17-18 with a 27 year old man from a nearby village. When her mother died, she was very young and her father also died almost 15 years ago. Rokeya has 6 children who are around 21, 19, 15, 13, 11 and 9 years old. Two of her daughters are now married and living with their husbands so her family now has 6 members. Rokeya is a tall, thin woman with large eyes, curly hair, often a gentle smile and usually she is wrapped in a *saree*. Although she is in her early forties, she looked to me to be much older than her real age as she has wrinkles on her face and cracks on her cheeks, belying her difficult life. She appears to be a confident person who knows her work and is able to handle difficult situations. However, she is not happy with her identity as a construction worker. Rather she is ashamed as she believes construction work is not a respectable form of paid employment for women. She is suffering from different types of disease which are associated with her work in the construction sector. For example, both her hands and legs are cracked because of continuous exposure to cement, she has already lost a couple of her teeth and suffers from headaches and hair loss.

Rokeya's husband was not a disciplined person since the beginning of their marriage; he inherited property but could not protect them because of his irresponsible behaviour. Consequently, he became a pauper within a few years of marriage. Although she felt the pressure to earn a livelihood within a year of her marriage, in her village she was unable to find any suitable job. Her husband was far from being a hard worker and she gave birth to 2 daughters in a few years of marriage; consequently, poverty was a serious issue for her family. Her sister-in-law then persuaded them to migrate to Sylhet so that Rokeya also could join the labour force and secure a living for the family. Rokeya had migrated to Sylhet along with her husband and children and started working as a domestic helper. After a few years, with the help of the women of her neighbourhood, she joined construction work. When she expressed her interest in working as a *jogali* in construction, her husband neither encouraged nor discouraged her, and eventually she started working. Now she earns Tk 180 - 200 (£1.50 approximately) a day if she finds a job; sometimes she gets Tk 250 (£2) a day for a roof making job. On most days

Rokeya's husband does not go to work, which has made her the principal breadwinner of the family. She, however, needs to surrender her income to her husband after returning from work and any deviation from this rule makes him angry which frequently leads to conjugal conflicts and domestic violence. Rokeya had borrowed money from credit agencies to bear the expenses of their daughters' weddings which needs to be repaid. Accordingly, she tries to pay back the loans on time but her husband wants her to fulfil the familial needs first and then to think about other issues. Therefore, sometimes, in order to save her instalment amount from her husband, she directly goes to the credit agency from her workplace to pay the instalments, which also often results in conjugal conflict. At times Rokeya feels like walking out of this abusive relationship but the cultural values of the society prevent her from doing so. Rokeya's husband never shared housework before she joined the construction work, but now he occasionally takes part in chores, such as cooking, due to unavailability of Rokeya's service.

In the workplace Rokeya is appreciated as an experienced and diligent worker by the people who have known her for a long time, so she prefers to work with familiar recruiters. She maintains that the construction labour market is now "ruled" by the young women, thus an "old woman" like her does not have much opportunity. Similar to Rokeya many of her relatively older female co-workers tend to believe that women's youth acts as a catalyst in the process of recruitment. They also perceive that young women are more able to cash in on their youth which enables them to enjoy greater facilitates in the construction sites. I shall discuss this further in Chapter VI. As mentioned earlier, Rokeya is suffering from different sorts of physical problems, but cannot afford to go to a doctor. She was able to have a surgery (to remove gallbladder and gallstones) a few months ago because her son-in-law provided financial assistance at that time. A short while after the surgery, she again had to return to work as she did not have anyone to rely on for the family expenditures. Rokeya deliberately conceals the reality about her work in the construction sector from her sons-in-law and other relatives as she believes it is shameful on the part of a woman to do such work; she tends to believe that making it public will only give her relatives an opportunity to look down upon her.

**Vignette 2: Olifa**

Olifa is 24 years old. She did not go to school but she can keep the accounts. She was born and brought up in a slum in Sylhet city. Her parents migrated to Sylhet before she was born. Olifa is now a mother of 4. She is thin and looks malnourished. She has relatively fair skin, curly dark brown hair and brown eyes. She looks sad most of the time; she is quiet, introvert and soft spoken. She does not wear a *saree*, rather she prefers to wear *salwar suits* or long dresses. She goes to the congregating point every morning and tends to look slightly unkempt, for example with untidy hair, old clothes and torn flip-flops, and it seemed to me as I got to know her, that she is both unable to afford better but, significantly, that she feels that she is not worth better. Her skin is cracked and dry as she does not use moisturiser on her face and hands although working in the construction sector severely damages the skin of workers. Olifa, as did many of my participants, expressed the need to apply some moisturiser on their hands, legs and face to get rid of the pain and itchiness caused by cracked and severely damaged skin. She was not, however, able to afford what she saw as a luxury.

Olifa's father is a vegetable vendor and her mother works as a domestic helper. She has 3 brothers and 3 sisters and among the sisters she is the oldest. Olifa got married at the age of 16 with her maternal aunt's son. Her parents arranged the marriage. She knew her husband since childhood, hence she did not disagree with her parents' opinion. Within a year of her marriage, Olifa gave birth to her 1<sup>st</sup> daughter. Her husband used to pull a rikshaw when they got married. He went to school but left school before finishing the primary level. Olifa's husband was not serious about his work; moreover, he had many bad habits including: taking loans from people without genuine need, spending money on drugs and gambling, and disappearing from time to time. In 8 years of their marriage Olifa gave birth to 3 daughters and a son. Every time she had given birth to a daughter she encountered the wrath of her husband. Olifa says whenever her husband earns some money, he spends it almost in no time and also on things of least importance, which often leads to starvation of the whole family. Within a few years of her marriage, Olifa realised that she needed an extra income, subsequently she started working part-time as a domestic helper. Her income was less than Tk 1,000 (£7.50) a month, nevertheless, she was happy to contribute to her household. Almost a year ago when she was expecting her 4<sup>th</sup> baby, her husband disappeared again. This time she

found herself in immense trouble as the house rent- which was Tk 1,800 (£14) - was pending, plus he sold the rikshaw which he used to pull (he was not the owner), and took a money loan from neighbours. Additionally, the credit agencies' instalments were due.

Olifa was pregnant and had 3 young children to look after. As she did not have money, she had to borrow to pay the rent of the house. In order to save some money on food and shelter, she moved into her parents' place who had been living nearby. Although her mother welcomed them, her father was visibly irritated and unwilling to let them stay in their house, so soon she rented a cheap place next to her parents' house. Two of her married brothers had also been living in the same slum in separate houses with their wives and children. Although Olifa's elder daughter was the one who was primarily responsible for taking care of her younger siblings in the absence of her mother, one of Olifa's *bhavis* and her mother also provided some support with child care, especially after she gave birth to her youngest child. When the people who had lent money to her husband saw that he was not coming, they became impatient and started threatening her to return the money. The credit agencies also started pressurising her for their instalments. In such a situation, Olifa had no other option but to find work which could provide her with access to more cash. One of her aunts used to live in the same slum and work as a *jogali*, she suggested that Olifa join construction work as a *jogali*, which would get her as much as Tk 180 - 190 (£1.50) a day. Initially Olifa was a bit hesitant but eventually she started going to Amberkhana point with her aunt and other female construction workers of their slum. Although her pregnancy resulted in most of the people unwilling to recruit Olifa, her aunt occasionally explained her predicaments to the *sardars* and co-workers so out of sympathy some people recruited her.

It was backbreaking for Olifa to work on construction sites during pregnancy but her helplessness made her continue until 2 weeks prior to her delivery. Her husband got back home a couple of days before the baby's birth. A baby girl was born, Olifa's husband became extremely annoyed and even refused to see her face. Her husband never shouldered housework, rather continued to express dissatisfaction over her domestic skills. A few weeks after giving birth to the baby, Olifa started going to construction sites, though irregularly, as it was highly unlikely that her husband would feed them, and after giving birth to a daughter the possibility was even slimmer. In

addition to the fear of withdrawal of support on her husband's part, there was another cause that drove her to the labour market right after giving birth to a child: her husband pressurised her to take loans from three different credit agencies and she was officially responsible for paying the loan instalments. Olifa murmured with tearful eyes, whatever she earns she gives it to her husband or spends on him; nevertheless, she cannot make him happy.

### **Vignette 3: Afia**

Afia is 34 years old, a mother of 6, from Sunamgonj district. She is a tall, strong and confident woman with dark skin. She wears a *saree* and covers her head with the edge of it, though on her way to the workplace and after work on her way back to home she covers herself with an *orna* (long thin scarf). She wears earrings, a thin, long metal chain and thin metal bangles on her arms, all of which she was able to buy relatively cheaply from street vendors. Her long, black, thick hair is always tied tightly with an old frayed ribbon. Chewing *pan-supari* with strong *zarda* and *shada* has stained her teeth to a reddish brown. Her hands and legs are cracked and her nails are mostly broken, reflecting her hard physical labour in construction work.

Afia got married in her mid-teens. Both her husband's father and Afia's father were good friends; the father of her husband died at an early age and in order to keep their friendship alive her father decided to marry her off with the son of his friend. After a few years of marriage, she gave birth to her first child. Afia's husband was not very caring about the household; they were suffering from poverty but he did not take any initiative to lift the family out of poverty. Rather he kept spending money on gambling and alcohol. Afia gave birth to 2 more children but no positive transformations took place in the domestic sphere. At one stage, Afia became weary combating persistent hunger and decided to do something to change the situation. She finally managed to manoeuvre her husband to migrate to Sylhet to ensure their livelihood. In Sylhet both Afia and her husband started working as *jogalis* in construction work, although her husband did not regularly work. One day after a conjugal conflict he left home with their 1 year old daughter without telling her anything. Afia tried to find them in different places including their ancestral village, but all efforts went in vain. She stayed in the village for a couple of weeks waiting for her daughter and husband, but they did not

show up. Her relatives then suggested that she return to Sylhet and start working since it was difficult for her to survive in the village.

Afia came back to Sylhet and started working in construction again. This time a man tried to befriend her and asked her out. At the beginning she was dismissive about the idea of getting married for a second time, but the man continued to try to persuade her. He told the people at the congregating point that Afia and he had gotten married and asked the *sardars* not to recruit her. Afia found that her co-workers and *sardars* were behaving differently and after questioning a few of them she found that the aspirant man was behind this. She then went to the man's elder brother to complain, but nothing worked and he kept proposing to her. Eventually Afia married him. Her husband told her that he was single and did not have other family members, but soon she discovered he had another wife, children, mother, sister and so on. Her husband took her to his ancestral home where his first wife and mother lived. She had a fight with her mother-in-law and the first wife of her husband and this conflict continued.

Afia gave birth to 3 more children with her second husband. She was required to earn a living for the family by working in the construction sector. Her husband's earnings were not enough to maintain both families, moreover, her mother-in-law and the first wife of her husband kept taunting her by saying that being an able bodied person she prefers to sit idle at home and live like a "handicap". She expected her husband to ask her not to work in construction again, but he did not discourage her. Notwithstanding, he maintains that women working in construction are of loose character. He often keeps an eye on Afia, but wants her to work in the construction sector to earn an income. Afia has 2 more children living with her from her first marriage. If she does not earn, her husband gets annoyed and reprimands her for feeding the children from her first marriage. She works as a construction worker to earn a living for the family, though hardly receives any recognition from her husband. In addition, he never shares housework and gets agitated over small issues, which often results in serious domestic violence and wife battering.

#### **Vignette 4: Begum**

Begum is 33 years old, a mother of 5 daughters. She is a tall and strong woman with fairer skin than many of her co-workers. Her long black hair is carefully oiled and tied. Like most of her female co-workers she also wears a chain on her neck and two metal bangles on both of her arms to conform to the norms of femininity.

Begum's husband had another girlfriend when they got married, hence he left her within a month of their marriage and eloped with his girlfriend to another place and got married secretly. After a while, Begum came to know about this marriage and her husband also returned home with his other wife. Begum kept on fighting with her husband and his second wife on this issue. At one stage her husband's second wife got involved in a romantic relationship with a wealthy man of their village and ultimately broke the tie with Begum's husband. Begum by then had given birth to 2 daughters; her husband became impatient as she was only giving birth to daughters. He wanted to secure another wife to have boys but Begum somehow managed to prevent him from doing that.

Once Begum became unwell and she needed money for her medical treatment. Her husband did not pay for the doctor and medicine and she did not have money to bear the cost so she borrowed Tk 500 (£4) with interest. The interest on this amount was increasing as she was unable to repay the loan; she requested that her husband reimburse the money, but he flatly turned her down even though he had money in his pocket. Begum felt very bad; she left the house with her children and subsequently migrated to Sylhet with another woman of her village. The woman who brought her to Sylhet was a construction worker, so she took Begum with her to work. For the first few days she was unable to find work, but gradually she learned the work and got accustomed to the culture of the construction sector. At the workplace she often keeps her head covered with a thin towel locally known as *gamcha* to avoid direct sunlight, dust and also the roughness of the cane basket or steel bowl she carries on her head. Although she wears flip-flops while commuting, she does not wear flip-flops during work on construction sites as she finds it inconvenient and so works in bare feet. As a result, her feet and legs bear countless scars and cracks caused mostly by cement and soil.

After a few months of her migration, her husband came to Sylhet to bring them back home, but she refused to go. Her husband sought her landlord's intervention as he was playing the role of her local guardian in absence of her male kin; the landlord convinced Begum to allow her husband to live with them. Considering the social reality, she agreed and asked her husband to join construction work. She gave birth to 2 more children and also arranged a marriage for their elder daughter.

One day Begum's husband received an injury while working on a construction site. Initially he hid his injury and continued to work but after 2-3 days his foot swelled and he was unable to stand on his own. Begum tried her best to ensure treatment for him but nothing worked and he became confined to bed. Four years after this accident her husband died and at that time she was expecting another baby. After the death of her husband, Begum stopped doing construction work for a while. Her neighbours helped her financially and after giving birth to the child, she joined construction work again. She arranged a marriage for her 2<sup>nd</sup> daughter and left her unmarried daughters with her parents in the village. She herself shares accommodation, in Syllhet, with a family acquainted to her through her brother. She reported that people in the workplace ask her about her husband, some of them even propose to her and make false promises of marriage. Sometimes she also feels like getting married again but when she thinks about her married daughters and sons-in-law, she restrains herself. When her husband was alive and working in construction, he often used to ask her whether she indulges in extra marital affairs with male co-workers. She assured him saying that she is careful of her dignity. She maintains that men in the construction sector, on the whole, are immoral. They often express sexual desires in a surreptitious way but she knows how to protect herself. She even does not mind helping her male co-workers to find a woman who will act in accordance with their sexual desires.

Begum feels discriminated against as women do not get equal wages to men. She, however, perceives men also envy them as female workers sometimes get preference over male workers in particular types of job. Low wages of women and their perceived docility are the main reasons behind this preference. Begum said she earns approximately Tk 4,000 (£30) a month and is able to save some money for her future. Every day she saves Tk 40 (35p) which she is planning to invest it in her village home.



**Vignette 5: Noorjahan**

Noorjahan is a 34 year old woman and a mother of 5. She is from Mymensingh district. She has never been to school. She is a relatively small statured woman with a height of no more than approximately 150 cm. She has dark skin, black eyes, black wavy hair and a lovely round face. Her lips are reddish most of the time as she often chews *pan-supari*. She is always entangled in an old but colourful *saree* and plastic flip-flops. She wears inexpensive silver coloured metal bangles which have turned blackish and a tiny nose ring to demonstrate her unavailability.

She got married at the age of 18 with the man chosen by her father. Her husband used to work as a wage labourer at that time in Mymensingh and she used to stay at home. During the first year of her marriage, Noorjahan felt that she was required to comply with her husband's wishes no matter whether he is right or wrong. Furthermore, she realised that her husband was a "tall talker" and not serious about his work. Although their family size was small, consisting of only two people, his income was fairly inadequate for the family expenses. In this situation, Noorjahan gave birth to a girl. Her husband did not have any landed property in his village, they only had a small hut to live in. She started raising poultry for extra income but soon her neighbours began complaining that her chicks were going to their premises and damaging their kitchen garden. To avoid further conflict, she stopped raising poultry which meant her only source of income was blocked. During the rainy season her husband's tiny earnings would shrink further and they struggled to manage 2 meals a day. Noorjahan often used to ask her husband to do something to earn a little more to support his family. Under such circumstances, one day her husband got back home with the news that some of the villagers were migrating to Sylhet to try their luck. Noorjahan's husband was not sure whether to move to an urban area but she pleaded in favour of migration and suggested if they did not find a job or could not adjust in the place of destination, they would return to their village home. They did not have the money to cover the expenses of migration so Noorjahan borrowed money from her brothers to buy the tickets and travelled to Sylhet with fellow villagers. Since her husband had worked as a rikshaw puller before, he decided to do the same in Sylhet. In Sylhet, also, his income was not enough for the house rent, food and other expenditures. Inspired by the women of her neighbourhood, after a couple of months, Noorjahan decided to start working outside.

At first her husband categorically dismissed her idea of taking paid employment by saying being a man he found it hard to earn some money so what would she be doing by going out, except tarnishing the image of the family. Nonetheless, Noorjahan did not give in; she kept persuading her husband and making promises that she would work only part-time and in no way would the household suffer for that. Eventually her husband allowed her to work as a domestic helper. Noorjahan gave birth to 4 sons after coming to Sylhet. Gradually her paid employment became a necessity for the household. Her daughter used to take care of the younger siblings in her mother's absence. Her husband who was initially dead against her job, by now had forgotten that once he did not want her to work outside. Her husband never shared housework, but wanted his things to be done on time. As a domestic help, Noorjahan used to receive Tk 1,700 (£13) a month on top of two full meals from her last employer. When her sons grew a little older, she also sent her daughter to work as a domestic helper. Nonetheless, it was not sufficient for their 7 member family. Her husband was addicted to gambling and kept losing money on that. The whole family mostly became dependent on Noorjahan and her daughter's income. Although her husband turned out to be completely financially dependent on her, he was very demanding. Noorjahan was struggling to manage the family expenses both with her daughter's and her own wages. A female construction worker of her neighbourhood then suggested she join construction work from which she would earn as much as Tk 200 - 250 (£1.70 - 2) a day. She could not resist the temptation of earning more since she had been fighting against poverty and joined construction work nearly 2 years ago. She did not tell her husband before joining construction work and also requested the women of her neighbourhood to maintain secrecy. After almost a couple of months, her husband came to know that she had been working in construction. Working in the construction sector gives her some satisfaction as she is better able to meet her family's needs but she is unhappy about the fact that her increased income has made her husband more dependent on her. Noorjahan considers construction work far more laborious than she thought. She needs to work the whole day and almost every day she gets some bruises on her body. Since she has not worked in the construction sector for too long, her skin is still relatively undamaged (smoother and not as cracked as most women's who have worked there for longer periods) but her hands and legs bear the scars and roughness caused by brick breaking and mixing cement on construction sites. She feels very exhausted when she gets back home. In addition to these work related issues, she mentioned, female

construction workers need to remain extra conscious and make an effort to efficiently deal with male co-workers' aggressive sexual behaviour towards their female co-workers.

### **Vignette 6: Rina Begum**

Rina is 37 years old, separated from her husband, and mother to a 14 year old son. She is from Hobigonj district. Rina is neither tall nor short and also not too thin, unlike many of her female co-workers. She has a dark brown skin complexion, and her eyes seem sad and tired. Her long, curly, black hair is often untidy. She wears a *saree* and covers her head with its edge in the workplace, but while commuting she always wraps herself with an additional *orna* to symbolise her *pardah* observance. Although she has no relationship with her husband, she also wears bangles and a nose ring to signify her unavailability as she wants to avoid unbecoming questions and interest on the part of aspirant men.

Rina got married almost 20 years ago at the age of 17. Her husband was a *rajmistri* (head construction worker) and was from a relatively better off family. After getting married, Rina came to live in Sylhet with her husband, she gave birth to 2 sons consecutively but neither of them survived. When she was expecting her 3<sup>rd</sup> child, her husband took a second wife. Initially he maintained secrecy about his second family, but gradually he lessened communication with Rina and told her about his other wife. When their acquaintances were questioning him about the future of Rina and her child, he wanted custody of their son, but Rina declined. Rina's brothers asked her to surrender the custody of her son and live with them; she turned down this proposal as well and decided to lead her life with her son. Under such circumstances, Rina joined the construction sector. Since her husband was a construction worker, she found this sector somewhat familiar. Her husband used to visit her occasionally to demand a share of her income, he even fraudulently expropriated her small savings on a few occasions. He did not extend any type of support to Rina to raise the boy, but he missed no opportunity to physically abuse her. Once he beat Rina up with a steel torch and she was confined in the hospital for weeks. A few months ago when he came to ask her for

money and abused her in public, her neighbours involved themselves. Rina's husband was beaten up by the neighbours for his misbehaviour and ultimately he stopped coming to her place. Rina told me that her husband had been an ill-tempered and aggressive kind of man. He used to beat her mercilessly for trivial matters and it was an everyday reality. She never felt that he valued her as a person or treated her as a human being.

Rina's extended family members wanted her to work as a domestic help instead of a construction worker; however, she preferred construction work as she could earn as much as Tk 200 (£1.70 approximately) a day if she finds work. She pays Tk 700 (£6.70 approximately) a month for house rent, which she finds hard to accumulate at the beginning of each month. She could not send her son to school and feels bad about that. She maintains that the construction sector is full of unscrupulous people, no one is trustworthy as the majority of them do not hesitate to come forward with indecent proposals to female co-workers. She also held responsible a few female co-workers for making use of their sexual capital to manipulate male recruiters and influence co-workers, which I will discuss in Chapter VIII. She further added that recent incidents of sexual harassment on construction sites often puts her off working with less known people or going alone with the recruiters. In addition to sexual harassment, she also complained about ubiquitous verbal and physical abuse on construction sites. Rina, however, seems to have accepted it as the "fate" of poor women. Although she knows that any sort of protest on her part reduces her chances of getting recruited the next time, she sometimes boldly protests against any improper sexual act directed towards her.

Sometime her co-workers make jokes about her and express the desire to find her a man, she, however, dismisses any such possibilities saying that the woman who does not get happiness from her first marriage, is highly unlikely to find happiness in a second marriage. Therefore, she prefers to live without a husband and wants to believe in her own ability to survive, but remains anxious about the future of her only son and feels sad to think about her ex-husband's negligence towards their son.

### **Vignette 7: Fuleza**

Fuleza is 33, a mother of 3 children. She appears to be strong both mentally and physically. She is a bubbly young woman who loves chatting with co-workers and neighbours but at the same time is extremely serious about her work and future. She mostly wears long dresses at the workplace and covers her head and bosom with a pale cotton *orna*; her hair is oiled and tied with old colourful ribbons. She also wears an old pair of bangles and a nose ring like most of the female construction workers. Her hands and legs are relatively moisturised and cleaned though closer scrutiny reveals obvious cracks made by continuous contact with skin damaging elements like soil and cement.

Fuleza's first marriage took place at the age of 17, the husband was her cousin. She is from Hobigonj district. Besides working as a *jogali*, she sometimes works as an earth cutting *sarder* in the construction sector. She migrated to Sylhet with her children 7 years ago after experiencing prolonged conjugal conflicts and domestic violence. Although she was not happy in her marital home, her relatives told her to have patience. Her first 2 children were girls so the relatives believed that things would be changed positively if she gave birth to a son. Her 3<sup>rd</sup> child was a boy, but things remained unchanged. Her husband did not change his behaviour towards her. He was an irregular earner and never seemed to be bothered about whether his wife and children were starving. Moreover, he used to torture Fuleza physically and mentally. One day their conjugal conflict escalated to the extent that her husband literally threw her out of the house, consequently, she decided to migrate. One of her male cousins helped her to migrate, gave her shelter after migration and introduced her to other women who worked in the construction sector. With the help of her cousin and other women, she started going to the congregating point every morning to find work. When she started working, the wage for a female worker was Tk 70 (55p) a day. After a few months of work she managed to save almost Tk 600 (£5), then her husband suddenly appeared before her. Fuleza was not ready to allow him to live with them, but he went to the landlord and sought his intervention. The landlord mediated from his capacity as her local guardian and well-wisher, and eventually Fuleza let him live with her. As I mentioned before, landlords are perceived as local guardians in the new social environment hence women generally tend to obey them. Fuleza's husband also joined construction work as a *jogali* and used to get Tk 120 (little less than £1) a day as wage. However, his habit did not alter much, he continued being highly irregular at work and started living on Fuleza's income. He used to ask her for Tk 20 - 30 (15 - 20p) every

day as pocket money, in case of denial she faced physical violence. Fuleza decided not to continue with this husband anymore. She left the slum and managed to divorce him after many difficulties.

After a few months a man started pursuing her, and at the beginning she did not give it much consideration, but the man continued to insist and eventually she married him. Fuleza's second husband was a *rajmistri*. The first few months of their marriage passed peacefully. Her husband took care of her, shared housework and asked her to stop working outside. Fuleza insisted that she would work as she had children from her first marriage and needed to secure their future. Her daughters from her first marriage worked as domestic helpers and her son worked at a shop. Her second husband wanted children but she declined as she had 2 girls and a boy child. Fuleza was the second wife of her second husband, and as time passed by, her husband changed his behaviour. He started spending less time with her and asking for money. Fuleza, however, was not ready to spend money on him. She was saving money from her daughters' wages and her own wages to invest it in the village so that she could arrange her daughters' marriage with a "good groom".

Fuleza appreciated her second husband's financial help in difficult situations, nevertheless, she cannot rely on him as he is not living with her. Her husband's first wife often fights with him over the issue of living with Fuleza. Fuleza's husband's first wife had many relatives around, thus, her husband valued that woman in a different way and that resulted in reduced communication with Fuleza.

Fuleza is hardworking, self-aware, intelligent and ambitious; she wants to achieve a certain level of material success in her life and get the recognition from the villagers as a successful woman. In order to achieve this, she does all sorts of work available for women in the construction sector. Although she feels bad about working alongside men, she also maintains that working on construction sites does not mean that all female workers are of loose character. She further maintains that men only can make sexual advances when they see women in front of them are not protesting.

**Vignette 8: Khason Mia**

Khason is 41 years old, married to a female construction worker, a father of 4, and from Hobigonj district. He attended school and had 8 years of schooling. He is of average build, neither thin nor large, he looks healthy. He has dark eyes and curly black hair and often has a smile on his face. When we met for the first time, he was wearing an old white shirt which had turned brownish, a faded old *lungi* (Bangladeshi male attire, which is worn instead of trousers) and a pair of plastic slippers. He was wearing a silver coloured wristwatch and holding a cell phone in his left hand. Although poverty was evident from his outfit, the high ambitions he possessed for himself and his effort to present himself in front of others as a respectable ‘man’ were simultaneously noticeable.

Khason’s father died when he was an infant, his mother raised him along with his other siblings. Since Khason’s mother did not have an income, she had to sell off their only piece of land to support the family financially. Khason got married almost 14 years ago. His wife’s father also died in her childhood and her mother married for a second time. She worked as a domestic helper in Sylhet before marrying Khason; her employer arranged the marriage with her consent.

Khason had migrated to Sylhet after dropping out from school, at the age of 15. He came to Sylhet with his neighbours for a short visit. He did not have money so for the first 2 days he starved and then went to a tea shop asking for some food. The owner of the shop asked him to join the shop as a tea boy, Khason agreed and started working there. Gradually he settled down in Sylhet, got married, his children were born, and started living there permanently.

A few years back Khason established a small tea shop. His wife had borrowed money from a credit agency to finance the business. At the beginning things were going fine, but suddenly he suffered a loss in his business. There was a continuous pressure from the credit agency for the repayment of weekly instalments. After encountering the loss, the credit agency gave them (again it was his wife who borrowed) another loan to revive the business and pay back the weekly instalments. Yet, Khason suffered loss for a second time, lost his capital and became heavily indebted. He started working as a

*jogali* in construction work, rikshaw puller and house painter depending on the availability of work. He considered construction work and rikshaw pulling as economically beneficial forms of employment but did not feel like doing any of them since both of these works are laborious. Khason never shares housework as he perceives it as 'women's work' and thereby doing these chores might tarnish his image as a man.

Khason does not like women to work outside unless it is necessary, however he admits that it is getting increasingly difficult for men to run the family with a single income. He believes when women go out, they contravene the norms of *purdah* and bring shame on the family. However, despite his claim that his wife's waged work brought shame on him, he expects his wife to bring home an income since he no longer has paid employment himself, by choice. Khason assumes when women earn money, they behave differently. To him, a good woman is one who does not raise her voice in front of her husband. He notes, for the smooth functioning of a family a wife needs to abide by her husband's desires. Khason's wife surrenders her earnings to him, he says she can ask for money if required. He claims to know a number of construction sector contractors and *sardars* (middlemen), yet never tells them that his wife also works as a construction worker. He wanted his wife to do other forms of paid work but in terms of financial benefits construction work is better, hence she is continuing with this. Khason is well aware of sexual harassment on construction sites, he, nevertheless, believes if his wife is honest, she can resist all aggression and temptations. He has instructed his wife to go to work with familiar people and in a group in order to avoid sexual harassment.

Khason maintains that women in the construction sector are much aware of different sorts of exploitation, discrimination and sexual harassment. He is in favour of giving women equal wages. He perceives that his self-respect has suffered loss by sending his wife to paid employment, he, thus, wants his wife to get equal wages with men and only this, he believes, will heal his wound. He assumes women can learn the skills of a *rajmistri* but social norms will hold them back. Since people are not accustomed to seeing women as *rajmistris*, contractors might not recruit a woman even if she is an expert worker.



**Vignette 9: Monzurul**

Monzurul is 38, *rajmistri*, married to a housewife and a father of 2. He is relatively tall, lean, dark skinned, dark eyed, with straight black hair and a moustache. He is from Gaibandha district. He had migrated to Sylhet almost 15 years ago. Before coming to Sylhet he worked at Gaibandha as a *jogali* for 5-6 years. He belonged to an impoverished family and was required to assist the family financially. Therefore, he had been trying assiduously to learn construction work and gradually learnt it from his mentor. Now his daily remuneration is Tk 500 (£4). While most of the male construction workers wear *lungi*, he wears shirts, trousers and sandals in the workplace. Although his clothes are better than construction sector helpers, they are not stain free. His skin is not as damaged as many of his co-workers but he bears the scars made by work as he has been involved in this work for many years. He is a confident and extrovert man who seems proud of his material success both as a man and a worker.

Monzurul did not have a specific intent to migrate but one of his friends was migrating and also encouraged him to do the same. Before migrating he was not sure whether to settle down in Sylhet but after coming to Sylhet, he liked the city. The relative affluence of the city, people's desire to spend money and plenty of construction work around attracted him and made him stay in Sylhet.

In Sylhet Monzurul lives with his male friends who are engaged in construction work. In Sylhet he needs to wash his clothes, fetch water for himself from the neighbourhood tube-well for a wash and perform other necessary cleaning tasks. Sometimes he cooks food along with his housemates. However, he prefers to buy his food from local small shops so that he does not need to cook on a regular basis. His wife lives back in Gaibandha along with 2 children. He has bought a piece of land in the village where they grow paddy. Monzurul does not think it is necessary to discuss everything with his wife. He has never shared housework with his wife and maintains if a wife is not able to manage the responsibilities involved in the domestic sphere, it is a shame for her as a woman. He believes a man gets married to a woman so that she can take special care of him and discharge her responsibilities perfectly towards the family.

According to Monzurul, work on construction sites alongside men is a matter of shame and a really bad choice for women. He never wanted any of his female family members to do such work and he feels even extremely poor men who have self-respect are unlikely to prefer their wives to work in the construction sector. However, construction work awards poor women with cash return, thus many women cannot resist the temptation and join this sector. He considers women as hard workers, and often recruits them to work as female workers try to make the recruiters happy with their diligence, which eventually turns out to be beneficial on the part of the recruiters. However, he also has pointed out manifold problems involved in hiring women, for instance, providing them security and facilitating them with sanitation while working in remote areas. He observes women could learn the skills of a *rajmistri* if they were serious about it. He believes women just think about their day-to-day survival not about developing a career in construction.

In terms of women's equal rights in different facets of life, he admits that he is not in favour of women's equal rights to men. He further added that men and women are naturally different and these differences should remain unaltered; even women's equal or higher income than their husbands is not enough to secure them equal status at home. However, in general, he is not against women's paid employment, but he wants women to remain subservient to their husbands, no matter whether their husbands earn an income or not.

### **Vignette 10: Mahbub Hossain**

Mahbub is 52, a *rajmistri* and a contractor, married to a housewife and father of 2 sons. He is from Barisal division. Mahbub is apparently a healthy man of average height with black hair and a dark complexion. He has what strikes me as a happy face. He is well dressed in comparison to his co-workers. Every time I saw him, he was wearing a shirt and trousers which were not expensive but were in good condition and dirt-free. Instead of cheap plastic flip-flops (generally worn by construction workers), he wears relatively better quality sandals or trainers. His skin is also in better condition, moisturised and relatively clean. He uses a cell phone and wears a wristwatch. Mahbub appears to be a confident man which is reflected through his comments. I could sense a feeling of

satisfaction and success in him regarding his work and the better life that he ensured through his material gain by working in the construction sector.

Mahbub did not want his sons to get engaged in physically demanding kinds of work and possessed high aspirations for their future. Accordingly he wants to make sure that they are getting formal education. Mahbub came to Sylhet almost 17 years ago along with the people of his village. His wife's brother had migrated to Sylhet nearly 20 years back and had been engaged in the construction sector as a contractor for years. He suggested that Mahbub come to Sylhet since the prospect of work was better here in comparison to Barisal. Subsequently, Mahbub, on the advice of his in-law, brought his family to Sylhet. At the beginning, Mahbub, too, started his career in the construction sector as a *jogali*; gradually he learned all the necessary skills and finally became a *rajmistri* and a contractor.

When Mahbub started working in Sylhet 17 years ago, there were not many female workers in the construction sector. At that time the wages were very low and women used to hesitate to enter into this sector. Over the past 17 years wages have increased, consequently, more and more poor women are entering into this sector. Mahbub considers construction work unsuitable for women since it is a laborious sort of work that damages women's skin, hair and leads to premature aging. Thus, only women of extremely poor households work here to earn some cash to support their families. He explained that women who have the skills and experience of working in this sector for a long period can even earn Tk 250 (£2) a day. However, there is an established practice in the market that women shall be paid lower wages than men and women should not challenge the existing convention or protest against the discrimination.

Mahbub never encouraged any of his female acquaintances to join the construction sector as he considers women's work on construction sites a serious slight on their family's honour. However, he often recruits the women who became familiar with him in the course of work. He thinks women are unlikely to be able to learn 'skills' as things are increasingly becoming difficult; the majority of women in this sector are unschooled so they will not understand the design, planning and other measurement related issues, which is also a major impediment to women's success in this sector. He further illustrated that women seldom express interest in learning skills; they just want to work

as helpers to earn some money. He explained the rigidity of division of labour in the construction sector, male and female workers' different role-responsibilities, and corollary different wages. He perceives women as hard workers who try to overcome their physical limitations by working sincerely and turn out to be more productive than men.

In terms of sexual harassment in the workplace, he maintains women who suffer harassment and make such complaints are not "good women" themselves. He claims that many women fail to differentiate between benign friendly jokes and sexual assaults. He, however, stated it is not only the construction sector where sexual harassment takes place; rather it is prevalent in every workplace.

Mahbub supposed women cannot become powerful without their husbands' "indulgence" and it is imperative that the husbands keep "control" over their wives and must not allow them to interfere in every matter. He is not against women's paid work per se, but he does not like it when wage earner wives speak back to their husbands.

### **Conclusion**

Poor women in Bangladesh have always engaged in a wide range of activities, thereby making an enormous contribution to the ongoing upkeep of their household. And yet, 'in kind' and caring work yields no monetary value and therefore it is not considered 'work'. However in the face of acute poverty women's role seemed not to remain restricted to that of care givers. In addition to their existing care giving role, more and more women are required to enter into the labour market to ensure a livelihood for themselves and their family. In Bangladeshi society women's mobility is generally constrained by the norms of *purdah* and in congruence with the cultural norms women's independent movement in the public sphere was rather less common in the context of Bangladesh. Even three decades ago migration was predominantly a male phenomenon in the country; women mostly migrated as dependents of their male guardians. The scenario has, however, changed in last few decades as women themselves are migrating to urban areas as independent entities and sometimes even without a male guardian. Women's visibility in the public sphere has increased to a great extent as large numbers of women are taking paid employment outside the home.

In poorer households, women's waged work has been viewed as an issue that has a detrimental impact on the status of the family. However, in this study I found that a good number of women are now able to negotiate with the *pardah* norms and the patriarchal values of the society to take paid employment outside the home. As I mentioned before, Bangladeshi society is, by and large, accustomed to seeing men, especially young men, moving to different places seeking employment, what is new for them is to witness the same for the women of the society. Nearly 43% of my female participants had migrated to Sylhet to earn a living without being accompanied by a male guardian, which is obviously a new trend in the context of Bangladesh. Of those married women who migrated with their husbands, in most cases they were the mastermind behind the migration. A few married participants had migrated leaving their husbands back in the village home to join the labour force; this illustrates their resistance towards patriarchal domination in the home and coercive cultural values of the society. A significant number of women's independent migration, determination to forgo the patriarchal bargain in exchange for independence and self-respect indicate women's agency and suggest an increasing trend of female headed households. A new dimension has also been observed in conventionally structured male headed households where the female participants were increasingly discharging the role of principal breadwinners for their families. Declining dependence on men in turn leads to the emergence of a new group of dependent men and reliable breadwinner women.

Migration to a new social setting, mingling with people from different walks of life, access to the public sphere and access to an independent income have brought some noteworthy changes in individual women's lives. Women were seen to be in greater control of their lives, for instance, they were able to make independent decisions about getting married or terminating a marital contract. There were also instances where women refused to have more children which means women are on the way to establishing some control over their own body; this is particularly significant in the context of Bangladesh. After migrating to the urban area, women struggled both inside and outside the home: they went through the domination and exploitation of husbands and male co-workers, faced new challenges and difficulties in every sphere and survived, which clearly illustrates their power, resistance and agency.

Despite women's tangible contribution to the households, notable presence in the labour market, ability to discharge breadwinning responsibilities towards the family, strength to establish an independent household in an unfamiliar socio-cultural milieu and so on, men's share in child care and domestic chores has increased only marginally. Most men were seen to be inclined to maintain the existing gender relations in the home. A vast majority of my female participants relied on their older children to take care of younger children. Some of them were seen to depend on female relatives, for example, on their mother or mother-in-law; while a few others were seen to take children to the construction sites with them. Men were rarely seen to reciprocate by taking on domestic responsibilities and were far from accepting that women were not behind men in terms of capacity. Equal status of men and women in the society in general and within the household in particular was seen to be perceived by most of the male participants as unrealistic and a violation of divine rules, which explains society's deeply entrenched lack of respect and under valorisation of women. I argue that the existing social structures simultaneously help perpetuate the myths of male supremacy in the society and hinder women's agency. However, it is not to claim that social structures are inflexible and only shape the individual's behaviour; in fact, the opposite is also happening and we will see specific examples in subsequent chapters that women's activities and practices are leading to important transformations in society. A slight positive change that has been observed in men's thought patterns regarding women's paid employment and presence in the public sphere is a glaring example of the fact. These changes are remarkable in the context of Bangladesh and, I contest, it will lead towards more significant socio-cultural and economic transformations in gender relations in the future.

## **Chapter V: Masculinity, transitional masculinity or failure of masculinity?**

As I mentioned in Chapter II, in many cultures perceptions of hegemonic masculinity revolve around physical and emotional strength, competitiveness, courage, and ability to dominate and control others. A social constructionist perspective, however, posits that the definition of masculinity and femininity is different in different cultures and notions of these concepts vary even within one culture over time (Sampath 1997; Baobaid 2006; Kimmel 2004). According to this school of thought, identities are socially constructed and are in constant flux. As such, masculinity varies among men with dissimilar backgrounds in one society and over the life cycle of a person (Kimmel 2004; Beynon 2002). A group of scholars however, observe that notwithstanding cultural differences and personal circumstances, in most contexts men's masculine identity is closely associated with a dominant provider role (Conway-Long 2006; Morrell and Swart 2005; Kimmel 2004; Hearn 1999; White 1997; Dolan 2002; Qayum and Ray 2010). Bangladeshi society bears close resemblance to this finding and, due to the fact that it is a 'classic patriarchal society', a man's masculine identity here revolves around his ability to discharge responsibilities as a provider and reliable earner for his family members, especially women and children (Haque and Kusakabe 2005).

Likewise, femininity in Bangladeshi society usually revolves around a woman's domestic responsibilities and perceived virtues (see Ghatak 2006). As I mentioned in previous chapters, in Bangladesh men's and women's spheres are clearly divided, where men are entrusted with the responsibilities that take place outside the home and women are meant to discharge the household responsibilities. Connell (2005:78) observes 'work is culturally defined as men's realm'. In congruence with this observation the public sphere in Bangladesh is heavily male dominated and segregated along these gender lines. This situation is further crystallised by the institution of *purdah*. The notion of separate spheres is widely valued in Bangladeshi society and transgression of this gendered boundary often evokes concern in the society and this seems to be equally true for both men and women (Kabeer 1994).

Women's presence in the public sphere is still contentious, and they are rarely admired for entering into paid employment. As a consequence, many men who subscribe to the

dominant ideology tend to believe that entering into paid work is an 'aberration' for women (Seidler 1997:51) and a slight on the masculine identity of their husbands. Studies have also demonstrated that men of poorer households are particularly less inclined to allow their wives to enter into the labour market as they consider it a powerful threat to patriarchal domination and fear that access to an income might confer women the confidence to challenge the basis of such control (Gordon 1996; Kabeer 1997; Haque and Kusakabe 2005; Salway et al. 2005). Given their socioeconomic and class position poor men may not be able to claim respect and exercise power as a 'real man' in the public sphere and may want to compensate for this 'lack' by exercising fullest power within their households, where they actually can practice this power (Seidler 1989; Pyke 1994 and 1996). Maybe restricting women from paid work is one of the means through which many of them are able to uphold their position in the domestic sphere, and in this way they find some consolation that they are 'real men' who have the power to control. This often leaves women of poorer households with limited decision making power over whether or not they engage in paid work (Kabeer 2000). Women's paid employment brings shame on their husbands' status to an extent that despite their levels of extreme poverty, the cultural patriarchal gender construct puts pressure on men and they do not want their women to work outside the home (Agarwal 1997; Katz 1997).

However, widespread poverty in Bangladesh has increasingly challenged the existing family system where men are the sole breadwinners and women are secluded and dependent on men for their maintenance. As such, more and more women of poorer households are now joining paid employment outside the home as a matter of course, out of economic necessity, rather than ambition. Yet, a number of researchers offered optimistic prospects of paid employment in that at least to some extent it contributes to women's well-being and empowerment. Men's masculine identity is, however, considered to be relational to women, hence it is argued by some scholars that what is empowering for women can be simultaneously disempowering for men (Clever 2002; Vera-Sanso 2000). Using their 'maleness' men often try to overcome such circumstances; however, women were also seen to use what Scott (1987:419) calls the 'weapons of the weak' to resist unfavourable situations. In his study of peasant resistance Scott (1987:419-420) argues, 'relatively powerless people' use different forms of resistance, which 'do not require planning, they often represent forms of



individual self-help, and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority'. I also contend that in a socio-cultural milieu where women's ability to exercise their agency is largely constrained, women on many occasions use indirect and personalised forms of resistance. In this chapter I thus analyse men's perceptions regarding women's paid employment, exercise of power in the domestic sphere, sharing the provider role and depending on wives for provisioning. I also analyse women's perceptions as providers alongside their day-to-day experience concerning gender role-relations. The male participants construct, reassert and renegotiate their masculine identity through everyday activities and interactions with their wives and female co-workers. I argue that in a hierarchical social system men tend to have power and authority over women's lives regardless of who contributes what to the households. Even when women make visible contributions or emerge as the key contributor to the family economy, they barely escape masculine domination. Rather, many men continue to cling to the prevailing gender power relations and enforce more authority in the home to obscure the actual scenario.

### **Men should have power over women: the male perspective**

In Bangladesh the the rights to inherit property are mainly transmitted through the patrilineal line. As I mentioned in Chapter II, although women have the right to inherit property, local gender discourse simultaneously denies women's access to and control over productive resources and ensures men's dominance in the economic realm through different institutions, such as marriage and *purdah*. Men's overall control in the public sphere, especially in the economic domain, in conjunction with the existing belief of male pre-eminence in the society, assigns them such a higher status that irrespective of their personal circumstances, men often believe that they are superior as a gender and thereby should have power over women. All my male participants seemed to feel proud to be a 'man' and maintained that men and women are "naturally" different. In Bangladesh, as mentioned previously, among the poorer section of the society men's breadwinning role is perceived to be the key dimension of their masculine identity. Conversely, men who were unable to fulfil their masculine responsibilities by providing food and shelter to their dependants, found they could uphold their masculine identity by enforcing strict authority in the home and/or distancing themselves from any

behaviour or task that can be translated by others as feminine. George (2006) observed that men's provisioning role is a key indicator of his masculine identity among the working class people in India. In line with George (2006) I argue that a man's inability to conform to the dominant notion of masculinity in the public realm by emerging as a successful provider challenges his fundamental identity of being a man. As such, many men are found to renegotiate their masculine identity, while others feel pressure to find ways through which they can assert their masculine identity.

In this study I found that a large number of men were unable to perform their culturally delegated role as providers, rather, they became heavily dependent on their wives to meet their personal and household financial needs. Consequently, these men struggled to maintain their status as a 'real man' both inside and outside the home. Nevertheless, they still believed they held the absolute right over their wives' decisions and continued to act upon this belief. I also found that men seldom agree that men and women should have equal rights in all spheres of life. Despite having experienced changes in men's and women's role in the home and the workplace, they struggled to believe women are as good as men in terms of their ability to work outside the home. Women's visible contribution to the household economy seldom appeared to make men feel that women are capable of living an independent life, running a family and thus might have their own choices about their lives. Most men continued to believe that in any circumstances women need to obey their husbands' commands no matter whether it is about joining or leaving the labour market or other issues. One of my male participants' depicts the scenario:

*"If I can find an autorikshaw owner who agrees to rent out his autorikshaw to me on a daily basis, I will not allow my wife to work in construction anymore. A man's ability to keep his woman inside the home is his status marker. If she still insists on going to work, I will tell her, "you cannot stay in my house anymore, you leave my house, go wherever you want, and earn your living". Women are like shoes. If you do not want to wear them anymore, you can throw them out" (Kajol, 41, married to a beti jogali).*

Kajol's point of view was further reinforced by Mahbub. He contended "if a woman dares to raise her voice against her husband's desire, it is nothing but the husband's failure". According to him, women in conjugal relations must not be given much liberty

to confront their husbands' decisions and intervene in every matter their husbands deal with. Most male participants of this study shared Kajol and Mahbub's feelings and seemed to believe strongly that husbands should have absolute authority over their wives' choices and decisions. However, one of the male participants, Kacha, stated that men's authority over their wives' body and mind can automatically be ensured if they can prove themselves as successful providers and protectors of their wives. These perceptions of men illustrate the importance of breadwinning in the construction of men's masculine identity in a society like Bangladesh. They further reveal that even though men are now familiar with seeing women working in the public sphere to share the provider role for their families, they are still far away from accepting the fact that women and men are equal. I argue that men's deep rooted male centred gender ideology and prevailing notions of male superiority hold them back from accepting the reality that women are not less able than men and as such, men and women should have equal rights in conjugal relations as well as in all spheres of life.

### **Men refrain from taking on arduous tasks: are they 'men' enough?**

Some employers tend to believe that men as a group are stronger and tougher and accordingly they are more suitable for physically demanding types of work; women, on the other hand, are deemed to be fragile, weak and unsuitable for such physical labour intensive jobs (Weston 1998). In stark contrast to this patriarchal myth, I found Bangladeshi female construction workers are strong enough to effectively perform all responsibilities associated with their 'job' as construction workers. Also, contrary to the widespread belief of 'strong men', the majority of male construction workers do not appear to be very strong and they hardly fit with the existing myth of the 'tough muscular man'. Despite this, a fine line is maintained between male and female labourers with the hypothetical conviction that men are more productive than women. Society in general and the labour market in particular consciously or unconsciously continues to believe in this myth. In reality, I, however, found that husbands of female construction sector labourers, who were engaged in construction or other manual work, often try to get respite from arduous physical labour. Some of these men boldly admitted that they did not feel like doing laborious work. They, however, did not feel bad when their wives were engaged in a similar kind of exhausting, arduous work to

earn a living for the whole family. In fact, they wanted their wives to do more labour intensive work as this was more beneficial in terms of money. Khason, a male participant, was constrained by his lack of formal education from finding non-labour intensive work, yet he did not feel like doing manual labour to support his family:

*“I started working as a casual construction worker, rikshaw puller and house painter. Working as a construction worker and rikshaw puller are beneficial in terms of money but both of these jobs are backbreaking. I try to find a painting job (house painting), which is not available on a regular basis so my wife works in the construction sector to earn some money” (Khason, 41, married to a beti jogali).*

A similar attitude was reiterated by another male participant, Ayub. Though he worked as a *jogali* in construction, he often tried to find physically less demanding forms of work despite knowing that physically demanding jobs were better in terms of financial reward. Instead he used to send his *jogali* wife for arduous but financially beneficial jobs, such as roof making, to earn more money. Although this was the reality of Ayub’s household, in public he was not ready to accept the fact that his wife worked harder than him and earned more as he perceived it would reflect negatively on his image as a ‘real man’ (see also Haque and Kusakabe 2005). In order to protect his masculine image among relatives and acquaintances he always tried to hide the fact that his wife had been working as a construction worker. Ayub was also seen to bar his wife from going to work when they had visitors at home and asked her to tell them that she was a stay-at-home wife. This obviously elucidates how men impose their desires on their wives and also twist the situation in their favour to avoid potential embarrassment in front of others.

Female construction workers’ narratives also support the case that men often try to avoid gruelling work if they really can. Bilkiss, a female participant, described how her labour helped her husband to indulge in indolence:

*“In the construction sector a helper is required to climb the stairs while carrying heavy loads. My husband cannot do such heavy work, though I do not hesitate to do this work. Since I also earn money by working on construction sites, he can take breaks on and off*

*and does not need to do the painstaking work; he now values me for this reason” (Bilkiss, 27, married, mother of 2).*

The vast majority of married participants reiterated similar experiences to that of Bilkiss. Ambia’s husband was also reluctant to go to work on a regular basis to earn a living. Instead of working hard himself, he frequently took days off from work and relied solely on Ambia’s earnings, which required her to work even harder. However, this did not seem to receive any sympathetic attention from her husband. It emerged from the comments of female participants that although men take pride in considering themselves stronger and more competent than their female counterparts, in most cases they refrain from working hard if they can afford to. It is widely believed in Bangladeshi society that women are weak and therefore need male protection; contrary to such beliefs, in this study, I found that, on many occasions, women are protecting men by providing them with food and shelter. Notwithstanding women’s visible roles and contributions, men often put forward arguments in their own favour, exploiting the widespread belief that men are superior to women. Furthermore, men try to consolidate their power base both inside and outside the home, without making tangible and substantial contributions. It also appeared that some women do not feel that it is unfair of men to push their wives into the labour market and be dependent on them financially. Even after making a significant contribution to the family economy some of my female participants seemed to feel obliged to pay extra attention to their husbands, which clearly reflects the nature of hierarchical gender relations and people’s perceptions regarding men’s and women’s relative status in society:

*“It is my duty to take care of my husband. No matter how busy I remain with my paid work and domestic chores, I pay special attention to him. I always massage oil on his body and legs and keep his necessary things in place so that he does not find it hard to get them” (Amena, 23, married, mother of 2).*

### **Women reinforcing ‘masculine’ men**

Studies conducted in the context of Bangladesh and elsewhere reveal that women rarely claim the due respect for the contribution they make in/to the household (Safa 1995;

Kabeer 1997; Jesmin and Salway 2000; Haque and Kusakabe 2005). Historically Bangladeshi women are socialised to follow their husbands' command in all aspects of their lives (Chowdhury 2000). In line with White (1997), in this study, I, however, found that women do not comply with their husbands only because of the fact that they are socialised to do so, rather women mostly conform to their husbands as they seek to eschew marital discord. In addition to the desire to maintain peace in the home, women also try to abide by the cultural expectation of the society by performing the role of a docile, consenting wife who is liable for keeping the relationship alive. Ambia, a female participant, told me that she felt she should obey all the orders of her husband, although there was no such need expressed on the part of her husband. She believed by being her husband he had been awarded the right to establish control over her life. It is not only Ambia who felt in this way. Another participant, Muleda, who joined the labour market due to extreme poverty and was pleased with her recently achieved financial independence, maintained she would not continue with her work in the construction sector if her husband asked her to quit. She was ready, though with a heavy heart, to forgo her newly found economic independence and go back to the previous life of chronic poverty and complete dependence only to act in accordance with her husband's wishes. Both Ambia and Muleda supposed that husbands have the last say and wives need to comply with their husbands' wishes, this is how conjugal relations work.

Women's commitment towards conjugal relations is not limited only to listening to husbands and following them without demur. Minara's husband was unwilling to do labour intensive tasks to earn a living for the family; since at least one person needed to earn some money to run the family, he had allowed Minara to take paid employment. In the absence of her husband's contribution, she had emerged as the sole breadwinner of her family. This reality had had little impact on the existing gender relations within their household. Minara continued to perform the role of a 'good wife' while her husband, even after losing his status as a provider, remained in a higher position:

*"If I do not find work, I take care of my husband after getting back home. I bring water for him to take a shower, wash his clothes and serve him food. I clean his feet, oil them and also massage his head. I do it myself; he does not need to ask" (Minara, married, 28, mother of 4).*

In spite of taking over the provider role in the absence of her husband's steady income, Minara always seemed to behave like an obedient wife incontestably accepting her husband's decisions. She was extra careful in her behaviour with her husband and restrained herself from doing or saying anything that might hurt his male ego. Another participant, Ambia, also took extra care of her husband; giving him cool air with a hand fan in hot weather, pressing his legs, and serving him hot food, are to name but a few of the services she performed for him. She claimed to do this only to comply with the role of a 'dutiful wife'. However, it is not to say that all women behave in the same way. A different reaction towards a husband's irresponsible and apathetic behaviour was expressed by Rokeya, who was also the primary breadwinner of the family. Rokeya narrated her feelings about when her husband demanded extra care and attention or tried to enforce authority over her. However, it also emerged from her accounts that although she sometimes vented her frustration on her husband, her deep rooted internalised cultural values of male supremacy often restrained her and made her feel that expressing anger and frustration on her husband is not "right" for a woman:

*"When I get angry, I lose my cool and shout at my husband. However, when I get back to my senses, I apologise to God. He is my husband, my heaven lies under his feet. Shouting at him is tantamount to breaching the divine law, but you know when people are angry, they do many things that they would not have done in a normal situation"* (Rokeya, 43, married, mother of 6).

The above comments made it evident that in Bangladeshi society men are given such an elevated position that their mistakes and limitations are often excused both by the society and family. Like Rokeya, Hasna also occasionally used to express dissatisfaction over the fact that her husband was maintaining a second family and hence not discharging his responsibilities toward Hasna and her children; rather she was required to provide him with financial support. However, this did not prevent her from performing the role of a 'good wife' by taking extra care of her husband:

*"I pay extra attention to my husband and cook special dishes for him when he comes to live with me; however, when I remember that he has another family, I get irritated. I tell him, "you are shameless, you come to my house, live on my money and keep another wife!"*" (Hasna, 28, married, mother of 2 daughters).

Sajeda's account also reiterated that wives' ability to earn an income and husbands' corresponding inability to provide for the family barely award women the autonomy to challenge their husbands' privileged position within the domestic sphere. Sajeda's husband demanded extra attention and wanted her to do all his personal tasks even though she was engaged in full-time employment. She seemed to accept the domination of her husband partly because she thought taking care of her husband would earn her the reputation of a 'good woman' among her relatives and neighbours; and partly because of her religious belief that fulfilling a husband's desire is her religious duty:

*"My husband wants me to pay him extra attention and do even the smallest thing for him. I, however, do not turn him down. If I do these things, people will say that the wife is so nice, she takes good care of her husband, and God also will be happy with me"* (Sajeda, 28, married, mother of 2).

In Bangladeshi patriarchal society women subscribe so heavily to the existing gender ideology that they tend to believe that regardless of a husband's misdeeds, maltreatment and irresponsible behaviour, a wife is obliged to take good care of him. Both the society and family appear to exert pressure on women, implicitly or explicitly, to stick to the internalised subordinate female attitude and this, I argue, serves to reinforce and strengthen male supremacy. Shaheda's account illustrates how family members persuade women to maintain the hierarchical gender relations in home:

*"When my husband comes to visit me, I take good care of him. I never ask him to do household chores. If my family members find that he is doing chores in my presence, they would get annoyed. My heaven lies under my husband's feet, how can I ask him to do chores? No matter how hard I work on construction sites, it is my duty to take special care of my husband. I press his legs after returning from work so that he can sleep well"* (Shaheda, 25, married, mother of a daughter, migrated, husband remains in the village home).

The cultural expectations of society are so entrenched in people's perceptions in a way that women themselves feel bad if they challenge men's privileged position regardless of each member's contribution to the household. A vast majority of my participants



were seen to give their husbands a very high position, and accordingly, confronting them or sharing everyday mundane affairs with them was deliberately avoided. Muleda, a female participant, felt that it is emasculating for men if they are asked to share household chores as it is perceived as 'women's work'. Another participant, Bilkiss, not only surrendered all her earnings to her husband, but hid from relatives and friends the fact that her husband did not have a steady income (hence she was required to work outside the home to bear the family expenses). By doing so she was seeking to protect her husband's pride as a 'man'.

Baobaid (2006) observed, in Yemen, cultural values and practices have been mixed with religious teachings and Islam has been adopted in a way consistent with the cultural practices of the society which is inherently male biased. Bangladesh closely resembles this observation. Although Islam has awarded women equal rights to men, women who lack formal education and religious teaching often fall victim to the male propaganda that the Quran accords men power over women. I am not suggesting that poorer women are ignorant and are not able to understand their religion, rather that poorer women are less able to access their own Islamic teaching and texts and may have to rely on second hand interpretations of religious 'rules'. I would argue that the lower value accorded to Bangladeshi women *qua* women, an understanding of which tends to become internalised, coupled with being given, what I would suggest are, very particular interpretations of Islamic rules can act as a barrier to women in challenging their subordinate position in the household while simultaneously supporting and reinforcing the maintenance of male supremacy.

### **Depending on wives' earnings: failure or reinforcement of masculinity?**

In Bangladeshi society where men's masculine identity rests upon their ability to emerge as a successful breadwinner, it is no wonder that men who fail to fulfil such duties usually suffer a backlash. Women's entry into the labour force also is not received positively by people from all walks of life as many seem to believe that it exhibits men's inability to fulfil their 'masculine' duty. Although there may be many potential reasons concurrently underpinning men's unwillingness to allow their wives to work outside, my participants' comments reveal that men's resistance primarily

emanates from the fact that in poorer households women's paid work and men's masculine pride are negatively associated. Men in the poorer households often preclude their wives from taking up paid employment and want to restrict them within the confines of the home to keep their power base intact. It appears that keeping their wives in the home is the only thing that these poor men can do in order to conform to the norms of masculinity (Vera-Sanso 2000). Despite their wishes, men cannot always stick to their decisions of not allowing their wives to join the labour force. Increasing impoverishment and men's inability to meet the needs of the family obliges them to negotiate with such gender norms.

While surmounting the inner dilemma when a man allows his wife to take paid employment, I found that men's sense of responsibility and expectations change significantly. It emerged from the narratives of my married participants that initially their husbands were less willing to let them work outside the home, however gradually they became accustomed to it and became heavily dependent on their wives' earnings. It seems that once men allow their wives to take paid employment and become fully or partially dependent on wives' wages, they perceive that they cannot claim respect as 'men' from their own social environment (see Fuller 2000). I found that many of my female participants' husbands believed that they had nothing to lose in the public sphere as they have lost the status of being a provider and a husband to a woman who is able to maintain seclusion. This frustration of being 'emasculated' and the fear of being undermined in the domestic sphere leads men to desperately enforce their authority within the home. Noorjahan's husband was dead against her paid employment at the beginning but when acute poverty pushed her to take paid employment, he gradually started to withdraw his financial support. Eventually he not only became financially dependent on Noorjahan but became very demanding as a stay-at-home husband. This situation was not unique in Noorjahan's household as she told me that in the slum where she lived, most women were engaged in the labour market to share the breadwinning responsibilities, regardless of whether they had husbands or not. One may wonder why these men stopped working and became dependent on their wives financially since it obviously had important impacts for both themselves and their families. It emerged from the comments of my participants and my own observations that men's inability to prevent their wives from engaging in manual labour in the male dominated sectors, such as construction, has a covert and/or overt affect on their reputation as 'men' among their

friends and extended family members. As I argued elsewhere, some men tended to believe that by sending their wives to the labour market, their masculine pride already had suffered a loss; therefore, becoming entirely dependent on wives for personal and familial expenses would be less likely to discredit them further. In addition, these men (Noorjahan's husband for instance) were involved in hard physical labour; wives' incomes rendered them an escape route from this physical toil. Hence, several of the men in this study appeared to prefer to adopt this option of not working. Kim and Do's (2013) study conducted in Korea demonstrates that husbands' unemployment negatively affects wives' subjective well-being. I found this to be the case for my female participants. Like Noorjahan, the majority of women were also under constant threat of violence in the event of being unable to meet the demands of their husbands. She explained her husband's behaviour:

*“My husband does not want to earn for the family. Nowadays he stays at home all the time and wants me to work outside to feed the family and meet all his needs as well. If I cannot find work, he shouts at me, rebukes me and sometimes beats me up to pacify his anger. He does not believe how difficult it is to find a job nowadays. If I try to explain to him, he does not listen instead he gets annoyed. Sometimes I feel like saying that “you were supposed to feed me but you have washed your hands of your duty; instead you want me to earn to provide for you, still this is not enough. You want me to do more”. However, I hold myself back from saying any such thing in front of him, because such statements would enrage him and he would beat me like an animal” (Noorjahan, 34, married, mother of 5).*

Similar situations were echoed by Sajeda and Mahmuda who explained how their ability to earn incomes allowed their husbands to become more irresponsible and arrogant. Both of them recounted that their physical well-being did not matter to their husbands. They just wanted their wives to earn money so that they could lead a relaxed life. If their wives could not find a job one day, they tried to initiate a fight with their wives, called them names and beat the children to release their frustration. These men stopped contributing to their families once their wives started working outside the home as they knew their wives would earn, at least, for the sake of the children. Mahmuda narrated how, if she did not find work one day or felt physically unfit to go to work, her husband would assault her verbally and/or physically:

*“As long as I can earn money my husband is happy. He just roams around tension free and gets back home during lunch and dinner time. If I can earn well, he is fine. The days I cannot find work, he gets mad at me, he initiates a fight with me, calls me names and also beats me up. He says, “if you do not want to go to work, then why did you come to Sylhet? Since you are here, you have to work to earn money”” (Mahmuda, 35, married, mother of 6).*

Similarly, Assia’s husband also would taunt her if she did not go to work one day. The majority of female participants of this study, who had dependent husbands, echoed parallel experiences of being blamed by their husbands. Assia recounted her husband used to accuse her of spending time idly and reminded her all the time that she had migrated to Sylhet to earn money, not to relax. In addition to her earnings, Sajeda’s husband demanded her fullest attention in the home, especially for him. In case she failed to meet his expectations due to the pressure of paid work, he did not hesitate to cast aspersions on her and resort to physical violence. Although he knew the nature of construction work, he used to get angry if she was late from work. He was always suspicious that she was cheating on him and having an affair with someone else. However, Sajeda’s husband is not the only person who suspected his wife of having illicit relations with male co-workers. Ambia and Begum also told me that their husbands often humiliated them by saying that they were extra friendly with their male co-workers and sometimes even accused them of sharing a bed with their male co-workers. With a heavy heart, Ambia told me that her husband was not intelligent in many ways, but he was good at taunting her. These sorts of accusations on the part of husbands generally do not go unanswered. Wives also speak back and remind husbands about their inability to keep them in seclusion. Drawing on Scott (1987) and Abu-Lughod (1990) I argue that this subtle form of resistance is widely used by these ‘relatively powerless’ women. Similar to Abu-Lughod, I also found that women’s resistance sometimes enable them to manoeuvre the situation in their favour, sometimes not.

Another participant, Rina, whose husband deserted her and their child, kept visiting her only to retain control over her small earnings. Hasna and Assia described that their husbands not only wanted them to work hard to earn money and spend on them but also

wanted detailed accounts of their earnings. Some of the married participants felt obliged to give accounts of their earnings to their husbands to eliminate any further confusions and conflicts over the money. It appeared that husbands of female construction workers tend to believe that in any circumstance they have the inalienable right over their wives' income. However, this is not to say that they always get straightforward access to their wives' money as wives also sometimes try to resist their access. Hasna reminisced about conversations with her husband:

*“My husband asks me, “Why don't you give me your earnings? Have I not married you?” I tell him, “yes, you married me but you have also taken a second wife. I need to keep my money for my children's future; you go to your second wife, she will feed you”” (Hasna, 28, married, mother of 2 daughters).*

Although men are increasingly becoming dependent on women's income, it appears that they are keen to persistently maintain hierarchical gender relations within the home. Participant male construction workers of this study were, largely, against women's- and especially their wives'- involvement in construction work. Unmarried male construction workers were seen to consider wife's paid employment in construction as a slight on their masculinity. Female construction workers' husbands, who initially were somewhat reluctant to accept the idea of their wives' paid employment, eventually accepted it and tried to maximise their benefit through their wives' earning ability. However, in no way were they ready to lose control over their wives. Rather they tended to enforce their authority in every aspect of their wives' lives and as such, the private patriarchy is extended to the public sphere. Joynul's account illustrates how he was controlling his wife's life:

*“My wife works as a jogali. She goes to work if both of us can find work with the same recruiter. I do not allow her to go alone. I do not want her to contravene the norms of purdah. I will not like it if my wife works with other male construction workers in my absence. The majority of construction workers flirt with each other. I neither like people flirting in workplace nor do I” (Joynul Mia, 54, beta jogali and married to a beti jogali).*

Brittan (1989) notes the breadwinner role is usually associated with some privileges, power and authority. The person who plays the key breadwinner role presumably enjoys some kind of privileges over other family members. I argue that this privilege tends to be gender specific and that the provider role affords only men a real position of power; it does not usually work for women who play the similar role. Women's provider role has not been associated with a corresponding increase in their power and authority within the domestic sphere. In this study I have specific instances where men remained in the position of domestic authority without discharging their financial responsibilities. However, it appears that men, to some extent, are aware of their situation in relation to employment and their inability to emerge as a 'real man', and women also seem to be able to comprehend that their labour power is being used by their husbands for their own personal benefit. Nevertheless, women rarely overtly confront men's superior position. Although studies (e.g., Pineda 2000; Fuller 2000; Chant 2000) suggest women's paid employment and their husbands' corresponding unemployment contribute to the emasculation of men, at least to some extent, I argue, while looking at this issue we cannot lose sight of the social structure of Bangladesh where the notion of male supremacy and appropriateness of the hierarchical gender relations are enormously persuasive. And this may rule out the possibilities of obvious changes within the micro structures (e.g., family) of society.

### **Are men renegotiating masculinity?**

As I have argued, men who feel that they are unable to conform to the ideal of 'real man' by their functional role in family and society, tend to uphold their masculine image through diverse means, including unfair ones. Deep down they also are aware that there is a 'lack'; and in order to claim the status of 'real men', they need to discharge the responsibilities entrusted to them by society and family. A few male participants of this study claimed that they did not push their wives into the labour market. They craftily tried to endorse that their wives were keen to shoulder some of the financial responsibilities and accordingly, they merely supported their wives' decisions to work outside the home. Although these men had to permit their wives to work outside, they continued to try to impose their own decisions on their wives. On some occasions men were successful, yet sometimes they faced resistance as wives upheld

their own decisions regarding employment. Kajol, a male participant, did not want his wife to work in construction, hence he asked his wife to quit construction work and take up domestic work. His wife did not pay any heed to him and continued to work as a construction worker. Drawing on Abu-Lughod (1990) I argue Kajol's wife demonstrated her resistance through non-compliance with his desire and tacitly attacking his male ego by asking him to keep her from the labour market by earning an adequate income for the family. Even though Kajol was angry, he did not make any attempt to oblige her to accept his decision. This idea of not forcing her to leave construction work, however, did not emanate from the thought that she had the right to make decision about her own career, rather it stemmed from the fear of being challenged by her. Men's inability to discharge financial responsibilities clearly makes a discernible dent in the value system and makes men negotiate with the ongoing transformations:

*“A man can do anything but a woman cannot. I prefer women to work as a domestic helper rather than a construction worker but my wife does not like to work as a domestic helper. I cannot force her because if I do so, she will say, “feed me and keep me at home, I do not have the desire to go out if you bring home what we need”. Her income is a great help for my family and this is why I cannot say anything. I feel bad to see men and women working together, joking, and laughing on construction sites. If I were able to feed her, I would not let her go to work. But now I am unable to provide for her so I cannot make a fuss about it” (Kajol, 41, beta jogali and married to a beti jogali).*

Another male construction worker, Kacha, whose wife worked as a domestic helper, perceived that once men lose the provider status, they lose the respect of their wives. Although he managed to prevent his wife from taking construction work and compelled her to take domestic work, he knew the basis of his authority was fragile, hence he commented:

*“If you can earn enough money to fulfil the needs of your family, you will get respect as a man and as a husband. However, if you cannot earn enough, you are neither a man nor a husband (kamai korle jamai). If you cannot earn an adequate income to meet the*

*basic needs, your wife will not respect you, rather she will tease you” (Kacha, 56, beta jogali, married to a domestic helper).*

Abject poverty sometimes requires men to negotiate with their patriarchal values by allowing ‘their’ women to take on wage work. Raju, a male construction worker, explained how men’s helplessness induces them to send their wives to the labour market:

*“In the construction sector I have seen beta jogalis who earn Tk 200 - 220 a day. Most of them have 4-5 children so they find it hard to pay the house rent and meet all the expenditures of the family. Under such circumstances, wives of beta jogalis sometimes join construction work. Men cannot oppose women leaving their houses as their earnings are inadequate to meet the basic needs of the family” (Raju, 26, married to a housewife).*

Both male and female participants’ statements revealed that men these days find it difficult to manage family expenditures with single incomes. Notwithstanding, a vast majority of men tend to express reservation and even resentment when their wives consider engaging in paid employment for the first time. This resistance, however, is not strong enough and is rarely sustained in the face of a little perseverance on the part of wives. Married female participants’ accounts demonstrate that after migrating to Sylhet, they found their husbands’ earnings were quite inadequate to pay the house rent and meet the daily expenses as in urban settings one is required to pay for every service. Realising their husbands’ financial predicaments, wives already knew that their husbands might not have strong voices against their participation in the labour force. Sheba, a female construction worker, was reported to suffer from extreme poverty because of her husband’s erratic and irregular earning habit, nevertheless, she did not join the labour force until he left her on her own with 4 young children. Like many of her male counterparts, she also considered that taking waged work outside the home was demeaning for her husband’s masculine identity. Male participants, whose wives were involved in paid work, also accepted that they could not strongly oppose their wives’ wishes to take waged employment as they were constrained by their earning capacity. I argue most men tend to believe that allowing ‘their’ women to take up paid employment without resistance is a slight on their masculine identity. Hence, even when



a man realises that he is left with little choice but to rely on his wife's income, he seldom overtly admits it. Jaheda managed to get her husband's nod to join the workforce by citing the example of her sister-in-law, which provided her husband some sense of security that it was not only him who was sending his wife to the labour market:

*“I had served my husband with the example of my sister-in-law who is working side by side with her husband and contributing to the family financially. I asked him, if she can work outside why cannot I? In Sylhet nobody knows us and the people who are known to us are also doing similar works. After long arguments and assurance, my husband agreed but with some reservations” (Jaheda, 29, married, mother of 4).*

Roab, whose wife worked as a construction worker, told me that the decision to lend him some financial support came from his wife. Only one of my female participants, Julfa, told me that her husband directly asked her to join the labour market as he was unable to work hard due to illness. Other participants' husbands initially either showed indifference or opposed their wives' decision; some of them eventually appreciated their wives' decision, while others just became dependent on wives without acknowledging their contribution. I contend that men refuse to acknowledge their wives' inputs even to themselves as they perceive it as a threat to their authority in the private sphere.

Since women are primarily responsible for managing the household and meeting the demands created within it, in comparison to their male counterparts, they experience poverty more intensely. Women with young children find it particularly hard to manage their children with inadequate food, which continuously drives them to take steps to solve some of their financial problems. Men, conversely, were seen to be more concerned to maintain their 'masculine' image and self-respect in public. Kabeer (1994), therefore, argues women define self-respect in a different way than men, and their children's and family's well-being often gets priority over other issues. I found this to be the case for my female participants: they defied cultural expectations in joining the male dominated construction work, but only to extend better support to their family, and in doing so they were thus, simultaneously maintaining societal expectations for the maintenance of the home and children.

However, in accordance with Safa (1996) and Zaman (2001) I also found that women's access to an independent income and emergence as a main provider sometimes allow them to negotiate with their husbands by posing a challenge to their breadwinner status:

*"I tell my husband since you are not feeding me, you do not need to know with whom I am speaking or smiling. If you do not want me to mingle with unfamiliar men, keep me at home. If I need to earn my own living, I have no choice but to speak and smile with men" (Hasna, 28, married, mother of 2 daughters).*

Another female participant, Rokeya, said she felt unable to overtly confront her husband's authority due to a fear of violence, however, she managed to negotiate some of her 'wifely' duties as the husband was unable to earn an income for the family and discharge his 'manly' responsibilities:

*"I do not pay extra attention to my husband. Actually I feel exhausted after returning from work. If he asks for extra attention, I tell him "I do not find time to take care of myself, when I shall take extra care of you? If you bring everything for me at home, I will not be required to go out to work and then I will have time to pay you extra attention"" (Rokeya, 43, married, mother of 6).*

Though the relationships are complex, studies conducted in different parts of the world have demonstrated that women's increased contribution to the family economy and men's concomitant inability to discharge their breadwinner roles have led to important shifts in the domestic balance of power in some cases (Kabeer 2000; Salway et al. 2005; Holvoet 2005; Francis 2002). In Bangladeshi society, the relationship between women's material contribution and status in conjugal relations, however, is not that straightforward. Although Hasna seemed to confront her husband by questioning his authority, it was not her usual stand. Similarly, Rokeya's role as the principal earner of the family did not facilitate her to negotiate housework with her abusive husband; she only managed to reduce the amount of extra care she had to pay to her husband. It appears that women are more likely to employ subtle forms of resistance. Married women migrating to urban centres without husbands, continuing with construction work despite husbands' disapproval; occasionally casting shame on husbands for their inability to earn; not offering extra care to economically inactive husbands and so on are

only a few examples of my participants' ways of showing resistance to patriarchal control in the home.

As stated previously, once men get over the initial feeling of dishonour and shame by letting their wives work in the public sphere, they gradually tend to become more and more dependent on wives' income. Nevertheless, conversations with the male participants revealed that most of them perceived women's paid work as a contravention of social and religious norms. As a result, husbands of female construction workers tried to mitigate against this inner conflict and in order to do so, put enormous psychological pressure on their wives. Despite this, it cannot be denied that a transformation has occurred in people's thought patterns regarding women's paid employment. For instance, unmarried male construction workers, Liton and Munir, who thought they would keep their wives at home after marriage, were now having second thoughts as they knew how difficult it would be to manage the household expenses without their wives' contribution.

It becomes evident that poverty, changes in the socioeconomic system, men's manifest inability to fulfil the role of breadwinner and women's increasing participation in paid employment have put considerable stress on men's masculine identities (Cleaver 2002). I would argue that even though they do not appear to feel 'demasculinised', the response of these men to their waged work and new gender roles conveys the message that men's pride essentially suffers a loss and thereby goes through some kind of crisis.

### **Masculine men under public scrutiny**

Studies conducted in different parts of the world demonstrate that when men fail to discharge their responsibilities as providers, their identity as a man is challenged (Qayum and Ray 2010; Cleaver 2002). However, accepting the failure in front of others in a familiar social environment is deemed to be too difficult for the majority, consequently they often resort to unconventional means to compensate the loss. I found that men who were in a slightly better position tried to uphold their masculine image by distancing themselves from doing anything in the public realm that can be translated as feminine. Men, who were more marginalised because of their socioeconomic positions

and could not thus display a customary public manifestation of masculinity through a breadwinner role, aim to do it in the private sphere. For instance, Khason, who was completely dependent on his construction worker wife, was extremely disinclined to share housework as he believed by not doing “women’s work”, he was actually safeguarding his image as a ‘man’.

It emerged from the accounts of my participants that *rajmistris* who are in a better situation in comparison to *beta jogalis*, seek to establish through their behaviour that they are superior to their co-workers. In so doing, if they face financial loss, still they are more likely to accept it. For instance, on construction sites female workers generally bring homemade food because it is cost effective for them. *Beta jogalis* also do the same as buying food on construction sites requires them to spend a significant amount of their daily wages. *Rajmistris*, on the other hand, in order to dissociate themselves from this “womanly act” of carrying food to the workplace, always buy food from construction sites. This behaviour of *rajmistris* clearly shows men’s yearning to uphold their masculine identity and classed identity in the public sphere. In Durud’s words:

*“A rajmistri does not bring his food to the construction site, he buys his food from the nearby shops. Rajmistris bring food with them only in case of unavailability of a food shop near the construction sites. However, in any way rajmistris are less likely to carry a lunch box with them. They do not want to walk to the workplace carrying a lunch box as it is a blow to their status as superior. Women generally carry a lunch box with them to save money and men feel if they also carry a lunch box with them like women, there will be no difference between them and the women” (Durud, 30, separated from wife).*

Sending one’s wife to the labour market is another indication of failed masculinity among the construction workers. *Rajmistris* usually do not allow their wives to take employment. Rina, Naju, and many other female construction workers took up employment in the construction sector when their construction worker husbands deserted them. Rehana’s construction worker husband had met with an accident and became unable to work so she joined this work. Meanwhile, Fuleza, who was the second wife of her construction worker husband, had to hide the fact of their relationship from others so that her husband did not face embarrassment. One of my male participants, Ayub, who along with his wife worked in the construction sector as a

*jogali*, deliberately hid his wife's employment from his acquaintances. He perceived that in order to maintain his status as an *izzatdar* (honourable) man, he needed to maintain secrecy about his wife's waged employment. Ayub described how they maintained confidentiality:

*"My wife works as a jogali in construction work. Today she has not come to the meeting point because a few relatives are coming to visit us. I do not want them to know that my wife also works outside for wages"* (Ayub, 43, *beta jogali and married to a beti jogali*).

Other male participants whose wives were engaged in paid employment also preferred to maintain privacy, none of them were seen to confidently accept that their wives were working outside to contribute to the family. Rather, the issue of wives' employment was always described by my male participants as shameful, an embarrassment that had a detrimental effect on their identity as 'men'. Monzurul's account outlines some of the implications of being a husband to a construction worker for a man's sense of pride and honour:

*"It is a matter of shame that women work on construction sites like men. It is really a bad choice for women to work on construction sites with other unattached males. Will I ever want my wife to work with other men? I will never allow my wife to work on construction sites as long as I am alive. I would not like any of my family members to work as a construction worker"* (Monzurul, 38, *rajmistri, married to a housewife*).

The majority of male participants believed that even a construction sector helper would not wish to send his wife to work as a construction worker. Faruque's comment supported this contention and shed light on how men's masculine identity is produced and reproduced with their ability to keep women in seclusion:

*"If you send your wife, daughter or sister to work to earn a living, no one will respect you. Who is going to marry your sister or daughter who works outside? What will other people think about you? They will laugh at you as you are unable to keep your women inside"* (Faruque, 39, *single, rajmistri*).

Accordingly, *rajmistris* and husbands of female construction workers told me that they never used their connections to facilitate their wives' employment in the construction sector. It seems that the presence of a large number of women in the labour market has not actually brought about significant transformations in people's perceptions regarding women's status. Society still appears to wish to uphold the chimera that the outside world is not for women and they should stay at home. Poor women's entry into the labour market is still less likely to receive positive attention from the wider society; rather, it is considered only a way out of a helpless situation for women. The idea of conventional gender role-relations are so deeply rooted that even male construction workers who regularly interact with females in the workplace have not yet taken their presence in the labour force as 'natural'. Rather they too continue to believe that women's entry to the public sphere is an 'aberration'. Consequently, men at best feel sympathy for their female co-workers, but not respect. None of my unmarried male participants were interested in marrying a female co-worker. Rather, all of them considered the idea of marrying a female co-worker as a disgraceful one, as these women were not "decent" in their opinion. Mahbub, a contractor and *rajmistri*, used to maintain a safe distance from any female construction worker who was even remotely related to him. He seemed to believe even personally knowing (not via work) a female construction worker is embarrassing:

*"If I see a familiar face on construction sites or at meeting points, I will not talk to her. We need to live in this society with others. I will not allow my female relatives to work in construction. It is a serious backlash to the family's honour"* (Mahbub, 52, contractor and *rajmistri*, married to a housewife).

Afia recalled the comment made by her husband which illuminated the reasons behind men's discomfort to acknowledge their wives' paid employment:

*"My present husband used to say, "women who work in the construction sector are of loose character". Now my husband's first wife and I, both of us, are working as construction workers. I tell my husband you used to brag and now your wives are working as construction workers. He says, "did I send you to work? You are doing it yourselves"'"* (Afia, 34, married for a 2<sup>nd</sup> time, mother of 6).

Like Afia, Mahmuda also reiterated that her husband possessed a derogatory attitude towards her employment in construction. Since he was not willing to earn a living for the family, Mahmuda had to work. As she worked in construction, her male co-workers occasionally visited her to inform her about work related issues, give her pending wages and so on. Her husband, however, would be infuriated by the presence of her male co-workers in the home, which often resulted in domestic violence on his part. He appeared to be extremely authoritarian about her mobility and mingling with others and always wanted Mahmuda to follow the code of conduct set by him. It maybe because of the fact that in Bangladeshi society husbands are thought to have absolute right over their wives' sexuality, and this is also considered a critical marker of men's honour. By containing Mahmuda's mingling with male co-workers, he might want to keep her from bringing 'disgrace' on the family and husband. Also, in line with George (2006) I argue that by asserting control over his wife's sexuality, movement, and access to and control over productive resources, Mahmuda's husband derives some sort of satisfaction- a gaining of honour as a 'man' from a conventional point of view. Conjugal conflicts were unsurprising given the conflicting state of their everyday reality and his perceptions concerning gender relations and his wife's status in the family. Sometimes their neighbours would try to mediate conflicts by shedding light on Mahmuda's contribution to the household and his failure to appreciate her effort. This used to drive him crazy as he perceived it as a conspiracy plotted against him by Mahmuda to defame him in public. Men's failure to obtain recognition as 'men' in front of others, and their wives' success in gaining respect from others, makes men feel more vulnerable. My observations find resonance with Atkinson et al. (2005) who also note, when men fail to reinforce their masculine identity through normal familial activities, they tend to feel inadequate which often leads them down the path of exercising authority through violence.

It has been documented in many studies that men often use violence as a way of dealing with issues, such as economic stress, low self-esteem, existing ideas about gender roles and so on (Clever 2002). Unemployment has also been identified as a dominant reason behind domestic violence (Kimmel 2004). Fear of being ridiculed and being viewed as less than a man often pushes men to resort to violence against their wives to release their tension (Foreman 1999:20 cited in Dolan 2002). In this study I found that men's yearning to uphold their masculine identity is also supported by women in many ways.

Women though, sometimes out of frustration, confront their husbands' masculine identity in private; however they rarely do so overtly in public. A female participant, Afia, noted, although she often fought with her husband for not behaving like a 'man' as he was unable to keep her in *purdah* and earn a living for the family, she, nonetheless, would not blame him in public. She would rather try to uphold his masculine identity by disseminating false stories regarding his accomplishments among her friends and co-workers. I argue such behaviour by women also serves to perpetuate and support men's rigid defence of their masculine image.

### **Men are the masters of women's lives**

As I discussed in previous sections, most participants of this study seemed to believe men's masculine identity is strongly related to their ability to keep 'their' women in seclusion. Accordingly, poor women who are living in households that are perceived as more conventionally structured- presided over by a male head of household- find it more difficult to make decisions regarding their entry into or exit from the labour market (Kabeer 2000). In families where both husbands and wives make a substantial financial contribution, wives are less likely to make work related decisions on their own. In Bangladeshi society, throughout her life a woman is under constant guardianship of her father, husband and son; she cannot be her own guardian regardless of her education and class position (Chowdhury 2000). This power structure within the household accords the man with the ability to make many decisions on behalf of his wife. For instance, whether to work outside, what kind of work to do, with whom to work, with whom to mingle, how far to go for work and so on and so forth. All married female participants of this study had to negotiate with their husbands before joining the labour force. Even after taking up paid employment, they were in constant negotiation. Khason, a male participant, did not work to fulfil his family's basic needs, rather he became dependent on his wife in most areas, ranging from earning a livelihood for the family to borrowing money from a credit agency to facilitate his small business. Notwithstanding, he was seen to control his wife's mobility and choices in every possible way. The statement made below by Khason obviously mirrored this observation:



*“I have strictly instructed my wife not to go to work alone. If the recruiters recruit at least 2-3 female workers along with male workers, only then can she go for that work. I have told her “if you cannot find work with other women, it does not matter. Go to your previous employers’ houses where you worked as a domestic helper. They will give you some money and food if you work there for 2-3 hours”” (Khason, 41, married to a beti jogali).*

Another male participant, Kajol, was strongly inclined to pressurise his wife to quit construction work but because he badly needed her wages to run the household, he followed his uncle’s advice to keep quiet. He maintained that should a good opportunity arise to earn a better income himself, then he would ask her to leave work. He further added if she denied or disregarded his command, he would not mind breaking the marital tie. Joynul, a male construction worker, also maintained rigid control over his wife’s life, which I explained in an earlier section. Muleda, a female construction worker who joined the construction sector without consulting her husband, assumed that once he knew about her work, he might ask her to observe *pardah* more strictly in other ways:

*“My husband may not ask me to leave the work as it would only lead to starvation alongside other financial troubles. He may ask me to maintain *pardah* more strictly and cover myself well while going to work on construction sites” (Muleda, married, mother of 5).*

It appeared from the comments of both my male and female participants that observing *pardah* remains an important as well as admired practice in people’s perceptions despite more and more women’s access to heavily male dominated realms of paid work. All of my male participants placed emphasis on the need of maintaining *pardah* on the part of women; women themselves on many occasions were seen to express dissatisfaction for not being able to adhere to the norms of *pardah* in a stricter sense. However, it was also the case that women were observed to be more adaptive to the new scenario in a changed circumstance and were actively redefining *pardah* in their own terms. None of the female participants were seen to wear a *burqah* (veil) while going to the workplace, although some of them told me that they would wear a *burqah* when they visit their village homes. When I expressed my interest to know more about this duality, my

female participants smilingly replied that it would not be appropriate and might draw undue attention of others (especially men's) if they go to the construction sites wearing a *burqah*; similarly, it would be improper to go to their village homes without wearing a *burqah*. Some of my participants told me that in addition to *burqah*, in their village homes, they would take an umbrella to demonstrate their *pardah* observance as *izzatdar* women. Men, conversely, did not wish to lose control over their wives and wanted them to observe *pardah* in a more conservative way as a kind of patriarchal trade off against her entering the public sphere. Afia, a female construction worker, mentioned if her husband found her not covering her head in the workplace, he got angry. Chatting and exchanging smiles with male co-workers on construction sites or at the meeting point were perceived as grave offences by her husband. Mahmuda's husband, similarly, restricted her movement and meeting with people, especially the male co-workers. As I noted before, Rehena joined the construction sector due to her husband's accident and subsequent inability to work; nevertheless, he had full control over her and decided with whom she would work and which clothes she would wear while going to work. Rehena explained her husband's behaviour:

*“My husband never allowed me to go to work wearing nice clothes. I used to go to the congregating point wearing torn and dirty clothes, with a cracked face and messy hair so that no one looks at me” (Rehena, 46, married, mother of 3).*

Whilst studies conducted in Bangladesh and elsewhere show that in patriarchal societies men tend to have enormous control over women's lives, some other studies offered a more optimistic prognosis and demonstrate that both men's and women's changed circumstances in relation to employment and income indeed have some impacts on gender relations (Chant 2000). I, however, would argue that the social structure of Bangladesh barely allows women to use their economic agency uncontested; women, constrained by their gendered social capital and deeply rooted internalised cultural values, find it difficult to pose a robust challenge to pervasive male domination.

### **Men should be the breadwinner**

In Bangladeshi society the separate spheres ideology of men and women is still so powerful that any divergence from this rarely receives positive attention. Women in Bangladeshi society, especially those who belong to the poorer households, contribute to the family economy to a great extent with their unremunerated work within the households, though this largely goes unnoticed. White (1997) argues, if a woman's productive and reproductive work is weighed in terms of money, it is no wonder that on many occasions we will see that the monetary value of her work is no less than her male partner's 'proper' income. Since women's unpaid work takes place outside the realm of the market economy, it is not calculated in the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and therefore, both the society and family fail to recognise their contribution. Even though women always act as implicit but important providers for their family, they draw positive or negative attention as providers only when they enter into the formal labour market. Likewise, men also experience a change in their position among relatives and friends when their wives take part in economic activities outside the home.

Participants in my study perceived women's paid employment as an obligation as their family badly needed their earnings; it was not a matter of choice for them. Some of the male participants were in favour of women's employment in the better paid formal sector jobs, others, in contrast, believed as long as women have food and shelter and are not badly in need of money, they should not work outside. No matter whether their wives worked outside or not, all male participants held that women's waged work in the low return informal sector brings shame on their husbands and other male family members. Nokhal, the youngest of all participants, associated his mother's paid employment with his own identity as a 'man':

*"I do not want my mother to work outside. I am working hard so that she can stay at home. If I cannot keep my mother in seclusion, it is my failure as a man"* (Nokhal, 17, single).

Poor women's paid employment is particularly considered as a compulsion rather than a vehicle of autonomy and self-reliance. Women's paid employment in the male dominated public sphere not only reflects negatively on the status of their husbands and

male kin; women themselves also experience disapproval in the home, workplace and wider society. I argue that this reality prevents many women from taking pride in their paid employment. Instead of considering it as a way of life, they tend to regard it as an escape route from acute poverty. Most of my participants told me that they took up paid work only when their husbands were either unable or unavailable to meet their basic needs such as food, clothing and housing. So, initially getting out of poverty was the main aim of the majority of participant women to entering the labour force. I also argue that society's lack of recognition of women's waged work sometimes leads them to rely on men, compromising their self-esteem. The difficulties women face both in the labour market and society at times causes them to believe that economic activities in the public sphere are not suitable for women. Moreover, indeed, they need the 'patriarchal bargain'- where men provide for women and enjoy unique prestige and privileges as providers- while women perform all familial responsibilities taking place in the private sphere. Afia, a female participant, thought along these lines and married for a second time. Unfortunately her husband did not offer her the bargain and she had to continue with her work:

*“After getting married to my 2<sup>nd</sup> husband, I did not go to work for a few months, but my husband's other wife and his mother were continuously pressing me to earn money and manage my own living. The day I joined construction work again, I was waiting for my husband to stop me from going to work, but to my disappointment, he was quiet and indifferent. I went out, but after walking a few meters, I went back home making an excuse that I left something although deep inside I was expecting my husband to say something, such as he would feed me or he would do as much as he could. I went back home twice, but it was all in vain. My husband did not prevent me from going to work. I started working again, with a heavy heart” (Afia, 34, married for a 2<sup>nd</sup> time, mother of 6).*

A vast majority of female participants of this study wanted to be able to access the patriarchal bargain, but this is not because they did not want paid work. Rather, it is because the labour market is segregated along gender lines and women are situated at the bottom. We must remember that construction work is extremely hard labour, and commands a very low status. Obstacles arise from working in the construction sector in terms of cultural norms, status, shame, *purdah* and emasculation of men. All that aside,

work in the construction sector is dangerous, dirty, risky and hard labour. Women worked all day barefooted, inhaling the dust of cement, continually working with soil, water and cement which is cracking their skin, their hair and teeth fall out, and they become ill. I argue if it was enjoyable, pleasant, if it were providing them with a sense of value and reward then women would have liked it. Women's subjugated position in the labour market and corresponding lower status in society precludes them from taking pride over their breadwinning role and they tend to believe that it is 'right' and 'proper' for a man to perform this role. Therefore, instead of enjoying their status as providers, women tend to negotiate with the 'patriarchal bargain'.

### **Conclusion**

Men, as a gender, in Bangladeshi patriarchal society, are undoubtedly located in a relatively powerful position vis-à-vis women. In this chapter, I tried to establish the link between working women's vulnerability and the widespread social practice of gender inequality and female subordination, which is sustained and accepted as part of the patriarchal culture of Bangladesh. Ehrenreich (1995) argues patriarchy is declining and the decline of the male breadwinner is identified as one of the chief reasons behind it. Contrary to this argument I, however, found that in most cases patriarchy is declining only marginally even though there may be a considerable increase in the number of female providers. In fact, like Tichenor (2005), I also found that a wife's breadwinning role does not necessarily translate into more power and control for her within marriage. The dominant societal discourse of Bangladeshi society shapes women's perceptions in such a way that they may make little effort to claim the due respect which is usually associated with the breadwinner role (Brittan 1989). To a certain extent, female participants even justified their husbands' behaviour and tried to bolster their masculine image in front of others. I argue that women deliberately prevent themselves from claiming recognition for their contributions and more control over the household. Unlike the women in Chant's (2000) study, who did not find any rationale to be with an insolvent man, women in my study seemed not to be inclined to evaluate men only in economic terms; rather importance was given to emotional aspects, familial expectations, cultural training and social reality. As such, they simultaneously sought to

conform to the norms of ‘good women’ and to hold onto the so called ‘male protection’ of husbands even while they perform the breadwinner role.

Existing studies (e.g., Rubin 1994; Pineda 2000; Fuller 2000; Legerski and Cornwall 2010; Beynon 2002; Brittan 1989) maintain women’s paid work and unemployed men’s masculine identity is negatively associated, and unemployed men suffer intense feelings of disempowerment, emasculation and loss of self-esteem. In Bangladeshi society, a man needs to earn an income and prove himself a capable provider and dependable person for his family. Lack of this ability creates concern among men as they cannot expect respect/recognition either from the family or society. Since these men are left with limited options to restore their self-esteem by doing something a ‘real man’ does, they find it difficult to fit with the definition of ‘man’ in the public eye. For most of them, dominating women and clinging to the more rigid divisions of labour within the household appears to be the easiest option to restore masculinity. As Pyke (1994 and 1996) noted, I also found that men often enforce more power to uphold and reassert their masculine identity; this behaviour on the part of men clearly reflects that they find themselves lacking when they compare themselves to their wives. This inner insecurity of men makes them feel that their masculine identity can be called into question. This study suggests, men are quite aware of their contested situation but they try to mitigate this feeling of being ‘emasculated’, perhaps by asserting their masculinity through domestic violence or by slightly renegotiating their existing masculine identity.

In this study, neither men nor women were seen to be redefining the notions of masculinity and femininity unequivocally, although both men and women were observed to adjust their responsibilities outside the home in response to the changing situation. Paid employment for men continues to be the source of masculine identity for most, while being a virtuous and dutiful wife in the home, in addition to earning an income for the family, serves to constitute the basis of femininity. In most cases women were seen to adhere to the conventional notion of femininity, at least within the confines of the home. It is not to say that they do not show resistance to patriarchal practices at home at all, however, the forms of resistance they employ are generally clandestine. The embedded tolerance for the subordination of women, the male biased macro social structure, the existing powerful socio-religious myth of male supremacy, the lack of social support, and weak fallback position in society creates a situation that not only

normalises the lower status of women but also limits the possibility of questioning the current system. The subordination of women in Bangladesh is secured in the structure of society not only by ideologies that support the dominance of a culture of masculinity and male privilege, but also through social practices that reinforce the dominant position of men over women.

However, I am not suggesting masculinity in Bangladesh is monolithic, I do recognise that it shifts and transforms over time, space, situatedness and people's experience. But it does exist, and even obvious things, such as women's paid employment and men's complete financial dependence on women do not seem, as yet at least, to have had a significant impact on gender power relations in Bangladeshi society. However, ongoing shifts in the households are not allowing men to ignore this and indulge in the satisfaction of being 'men', rather men were seen to develop new strategies to deal with the changed scenario. Nevertheless, the current socio-cultural system is, thus, inherently exploitative for women. On the one hand it constrains women from challenging male superiority and causes them to accept a subservient female role; and on the other, it puts an enormous pressure on men to emerge as 'real men', leading them to reassert their masculine identity using often vicarious means, which can expose women to further vulnerability.

## **Chapter VI: Women, paid employment and public patriarchy**

Women's paid employment has been a key area of academic debate for many years (Herring and Wilson-Sadberry 1993). A group of scholars, including liberal feminists, draw heavily on women's paid employment as an emancipatory and status enhancing factor for women and have offered some optimistic prospects regarding women's entry into paid work (Bandarage 1984; Young 1989). A number of researchers, however, have shed important light on some of the negative aspects of women's experiences of, and specific locatedness within, the labour market and reached rather more gloomy conclusions. For them, paid employment has changed women's gendered position in many positive ways, but certain aspects remain unchanged, such as sex segregation in the labour market, ghettoisation of some occupations as female, gender differences in remuneration alongside other forms of patriarchal oppression in the workplace (Edgren 1982; Kung 1983; Elson and Pearson 1981 and 1984; Heyzer 1989; Dex 1985; Hakim 1996; Weber and Higginbotham 1997; Pearson 2000; Kabeer 2008). Walby (1986 and 1997) extends the argument that occupational segregation is deliberate and is used against women to restrict them to certain 'female' jobs, so that they invariably earn less than men, thereby ensuring men continue to benefit from their patriarchal dividend.

It has been well documented that women receive lower remuneration than men (Meng 1998; Selwyn 2010). Studies reveal that even in advanced economies like the USA and the UK women are still lagging behind men in terms of salaries (Dex 1985; Higginbotham 1997). While men's wages are viewed as a breadwinners' income, women's wages tend to be considered only as a supplement to that of men's earnings (Safa 1984; Steinberg 1995). As such, the 'supplementary' role of women has been used to justify the persistent inequality in wages for women (Safa 1984:1168). Jacobs (1995) argues that women are paid less than men largely using the rationale that they do different work. As such, equal pay for equal work legislation offers a less than adequate remedy for this issue. Ghettoisation of female jobs, another significant problem women encounter in the labour market, implies that women are increasingly represented in certain segments of occupations that are associated with low and declining status (Wright and Jacobs 1995). Studies conducted around the world over the past several decades continue to demonstrate that women perform the lowest paid activities and are



concentrated mainly in low status occupations (Grown and Sebstad 1989; Pearson 1995; Chan 2003; United Nations Statistics Division 2010).

Weston (1998) finds that men in the workplace are generally viewed as strong, tough and risk loving, while women are constantly scrutinised and required to prove their ability and the widespread notion is that women are less competent than men (Mitra 2005). Women are considered to be ‘naturally’ more suited to tedious and monotonous work (Elson and Pearson 1984; Weston 1998; Pearson 2007). Whether a job is regarded as ‘skilled’, ‘semi-skilled’ or ‘unskilled’ is largely determined by which gender performs it; thus, ‘women’s work’ frequently falls under the heading of ‘unskilled’ or ‘semi-skilled’, whilst ‘men’s work’ is mostly classed as ‘skilled’, no matter how alike those jobs may be (Phillips and Taylor 1980; Elson and Pearson 1984; Momsen 1993; Kabeer 2008). Even in the same industry women’s jobs tend to have lower average hourly earnings than men, to be graded as having less skill, and to have less authority (Purcell 1984). This scenario is not the unique feature of one industry but rather a ubiquitous situation in most workplaces.

Like sex segregation, female ghettoisation, and wage discrimination, sexual harassment is another harmful and pernicious obstacle to women’s workplace success and satisfaction (Willness et al. 2007). Although it is difficult to estimate the exact number of occurrences, studies conducted across the globe demonstrate that sexual harassment and workplace violence occur quite frequently (Barling et al. 2001; Kabeer 2008; Khosla 2009). Gutek and Morasch (1982) contest that women in male dominated workplaces often experience sexual harassment, in part due to the skewed sex ratio. Saunders and Eastal AM’s (2013) more recent study demonstrates that women who are engaged in occupations which are perceived as male are more likely to encounter sexual harassment. Organisational context is also seen to play a very important role in reducing or augmenting offensive sexual behaviours in the workplace. According to Barling et al. (2001), if an organisation takes a strong line on sexual harassment and potential perpetrators anticipate severe sanctions, sexual harassment might not be rampant. Studies reveal that sexual harassment in the workplace is interconnected with workers’ job satisfaction and it often results in the deterioration of victims’ relationships with co-workers, and can lead them to quit their jobs (Barling et al. 2001; Schneider et al. 1997). However women’s experiences in the workplace are inextricably linked with the

structural and normative features of the society where they live as these continue to shape women's position in the labour market, conditions of work, wages, and their self-perceptions and options (Higginbotham 1997). Hirschman (1970) highlighted that the capacity for 'voice' and 'exit' are respectively related to expressing dissatisfaction and the ability to walk out from inauspicious situations. Agarwal (1997) argues the ability to use the 'exit' option is associated with numerous aspects, amongst which the most important one is the strength of the actors' fallback position. In Bangladeshi society poor women who have restricted or no access to the 'patriarchal bargain' find it difficult to choose the 'exit' option from the labour market even in unbearable situations. The gender stratified nature of the job market and cultural ideology of the society usually weaken women's fallback position.

Women's labour force participation has evoked various concerns among scholars about their workplace experiences. In Bangladeshi society, as I mentioned in previous chapters, women's increased involvement in the labour market is a relatively recent phenomenon. The large scale of women engaged in wage income outside the home for the first time became visible only in 1980s with the entry of the new market factories and garment industry into this country (Kabeer 2000). Women in Bangladesh are primarily and predominantly responsible for all household chores and the society's normative expectation is for women to continue with this role. However, at present, women are working outside the home in greater numbers. Studies revealed that the shift of poor women from the home to the labour market is largely associated with dire economic necessity rather than a preference for working in the public sphere (Wahra and Rahman 1995; Kibria 1995; Kabeer 1997). I found this to be the case for the female construction workers who are extremely poor and in most cases seemed to have restricted opportunity to rely on the 'patriarchal bargain' (Kandiyoti 1988). Under these circumstances, it is difficult for women to bargain with patriarchal systems and, to draw on Hirschman (1970), raise their 'voice'.

Hirschman's (1970) 'voice/exit' theory offers a useful framework for understanding the dilemmas of women who experience an intertwining of poverty in the domestic sphere and gender based workplace exploitation when classic patriarchy is at risk. In this chapter I will investigate the workplace experiences of female construction workers in Bangladesh and men's views regarding women's work in a heavily male dominated

sphere like construction. I devote substantial attention to describing and analysing differences between men's and women's work experiences. Here I do not intend to discuss women's position in the domestic sphere in relation to their paid work, as I am going to focus on that in the next chapter. As mentioned before, it is well documented in academic literature that women are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination in the workplace: as a corollary, attention in this chapter is predominantly paid to women's experiences in the workplace. Since men play a significant role in the construction of women's experiences, men's perspectives have also been included to supplement women's narratives, in order to portray a broader picture of gender relations.

### **A day on a construction site**

I went to the construction site at around 9.20 am. It was a huge construction site where 3 big buildings were under construction; nevertheless, when I went there the construction site was relatively quiet. The construction site was within the boundary of the university where I had been working. It took me almost 50 minutes to reach the construction site from my home by a rikshaw. After alighting the rikshaw I first walked to the end of the construction site. There I found a small group of male construction workers working with iron rods, which is exclusively believed to be 'male job'. In one corner a female construction worker was moving soil, cement and other materials to clear the space. I went there, male workers looked at me, I explained my motives and they seemed to be fine with my explanation and neither interrogated me further nor showed extra exuberance. By this time the female worker had been asked to dig a hole. Two male supervisors were supervising her work; one was just sitting in front of her idly and another one was walking around and rebuking her for being "slow and inadequate". The woman did not speak back and quietly continued with her work. I then walked to another spot on the site where roof making was about to begin. Project engineers, site supervisors, *sardars* and other people involved in the process were present to monitor the work. The superintendent engineer already knew me so he introduced me to other people, and eventually the site engineer allowed me to go to the main site. When I went there a large number of male and female construction workers were having their food. I

had been told that before starting the second spell of work these people were taking a short break.



I saw some of the workers were congregating in small circles whilst eating their food, and they all had individual lunch boxes. The rest of the workers were just sitting in a wide open space having their meals. A number of small children were also present on the site, playing around and taking food with their mother/father. The *jogalis* (construction sector helpers) who were partaking of food were not joined by the *rajmistris*, *sarders* or contractors. In Bangladeshi society separate spheres of men and women are still valued but on construction sites the scenario was entirely different. Both male and female workers were mingling in a friendly manner, chatting, sharing food, getting involved in arguments and sharing happiness and laughter. And it was the same case both at the congregating points and on construction sites. I expressed my desire to take pictures of the workers when they were having their meals. Site authority allowed me to take pictures and talk to the workers when they had some free time. I gained consent from the people whose pictures I was going to take. Some of them were posing in front of the camera, for example, pretending to feed co-workers and so on. I found construction sites more comfortable than the congregating points as my presence was taken with relative ease by the large majority of people present there.

Once the workers were done with eating, a supervisor came to call them back to work. Within a few minutes, both male and female workers became extremely busy with work. Like other fields of construction, in roof making also, divisions of labour along gender lines were persistent. Project engineers, site supervisors, and *sarders* all were monitoring the work. A site engineer asked someone to give me a chair. There were 5-6

plastic chairs for the engineers and other officials to sit under open sky in front of the building under construction. At first I was hesitant to sit on a chair as I was feeling bad for the construction workers who were working very hard in front of me. But they (engineers/ officials) insisted and I could not turn them down as it was imperative on my part to maintain cordial relationship with these people in order to gain access to construction sites. Within an hour most of the officials left the place. However, the site supervisor and other people who worked on the site stayed. Although the day was not very hot and the sun was not too bright, the construction workers working there seemed to feel very warm as they were working under direct sunlight and were doing hard physical labour. *Beti jogalis* (female construction workers) were continuously pouring chip, cement and soil in machines and climbing temporary stairs made of rope and bamboo while carrying large *kodai* (bowls) full of soil, cement, broken bricks and other material on their head (bowls weighing no less than 20 kilograms). Male machinists were running machines, *beta jogalis* (male helpers) were carrying loads like their female co-workers, and *rajmistris* (head construction workers) were busy with fixing rods and other specialised “masonry” tasks.

The air of the construction site was dusty because of cement, soil and broken bricks and the surface of the site was muddy as workers were pouring water on small stones kept nearby for roof making purposes. Large numbers of people’s foot steps on the sandy and watery surface made the place extremely grimy. Noise of machines also added a dimension to the place. Supervisors and *rajmistris* were talking very loudly, sometimes they seemed to shout in chorus only to encourage workers, while at times they were just reprimanding workers for their “poor” performance. Both male and female construction workers were occasionally shouting at each other to vent frustration. Although both male and female construction workers were working hard, I realised female construction workers were facing relatively harsh control by the supervisors mainly because of their gender. I observed that supervisors used a relatively soft tone in disciplining male workers. Roof making is an extremely laborious form of task as workers need to run the entire time the work continues. After more than an hour a few male construction workers handed their tasks to other male co-workers and took a short tea break. During tea break they were chatting among themselves and the tea shop owner also joined them. The small temporary tea shop set-up on the construction site had an audio cassette player; in the tea shop workers were also enjoying music played there while chatting. I

took pictures of them. When I was clicking pictures, they appeared to be happy and posed in a relaxed mood. After a while a female worker also took a break to have some tea and *pan-supari*. I approached her. She also appeared to be happy to talk to me as she got the nod from the higher authority and also after a strenuous session of work she might have found the talk relatively relaxing. However, soon one of her female co-workers saw us chatting and immediately rushed to us. She tightly held the woman's hand (whom I was talking with) and dragged her back to work. She was neither a supervisor nor a *sarder*, nevertheless, she assertively took her back. I was completely surprised by her behaviour and asked the site supervisor about it. He smilingly replied "since you were talking to this woman, she was getting some rest from work which made the other woman jealous. So she behaved like this". Roof making tasks continued around until 4.30 am without stopping. During this period workers rarely got the opportunity to take rest. While observing construction workers, I took pictures, had talks with the officials, people employed by the project management, such as night guards, site supervisors, and the tea shop owner. I got important insights about the physical risks involved in construction work on the part of the workers, propensity of accidents and intensity of labour in construction work and so on and so forth. At around 4.40 pm workers stopped working as they achieved the target for that day by using all of the ingredients they prepared for that day's work. All of the workers looked exhausted; they took their belongings, such as lunch box, axe and cane basket and rushed to the nearby lake to have a wash. I also left the place thanking them.



### **Dangerous, dirty and degrading**

Globally the construction sector is known to be dirty, dangerous and degrading (Byrne et al. 2005). Bharara et al. (2012) found that the rate of accidents is very high among the construction workers in India; even incidences of death and injury on construction sites resulting from these accidents are quite frequent. Although the actual figure is not known, Bangladesh proves to be no exception in this regard. In concurrence with Pattanaik (2009) and my own study (Choudhury 2013), I also observed that precautions taken on construction sites to protect the workers from potential risks and health hazards are few or non-existent. Women worked bare footed or wearing flip-flops, wearing *sarees*, without helmets, gloves, masks or any kind of protection and so they were vulnerable to minor or major injuries and long-term health hazards. All of them said they had received injuries at least a few times and were experiencing physical problems such as skin disease, asthma, chronic headache, hair loss, tooth loss, and premature aging. Monzurul's statement illustrates my observation:

*“There is no safety of our lives in construction work. We often encounter accidents, in fact, minor accidents are everyday incidents on construction sites, but sometimes major incidents, such as a building collapse, also takes place. Men and women, who work as helpers on construction sites, physically suffer the most” (Monzurul, 38, rajmistri, married to a housewife).*



A female construction worker, Rehena, described an accident she met with on the construction site:

*“Once in the workplace I was carrying corrugated steel sheets with another male co-worker, he was giving me sheets from above and I was holding them and keeping them in place. Suddenly I missed a sheet and the co-worker could not take hold of it so the sheet fell off on my forehead and I was injured badly. Now when I carry something heavy on my head, it hurts a lot” (Rehena, 46, married, mother of 3).*

Female participants of this study narrated that they found construction work more arduous in reality than they thought before joining this sector; nevertheless, they continued to work for their family’s sake. This concurs with the attitude of female factory workers in Rahman’s (2010) study. Olifa, a female participant, succinctly articulated “it definitely facilitates women’s access to cash earning but shortens their lives”. Sheba expressed a similar feeling and described how difficult the work was. As she explained, *jogalis* (construction sector helpers) need to carry heavy loads, climb stairs and walk on uneven surfaces with loads on their heads. They get few opportunities to take rests. Almost everyone said although they feel extremely tired when they go to bed, they seldom have good sleep because of physical pain. Many of them complain about their eyesight but cannot think about leaving this work as their survival depends on it. Rokeya described how the work is not only gruelling but physically decaying. Participant male construction workers also completely agree with their female counterparts on this issue. Liton, illustrated the male view:

*“Construction work is very difficult. If I work 3-4 days at a stretch, I feel like taking rest for a day or two. I want to work every day but my body does not permit it. In construction work cement is our worst enemy. It damages our skin badly. Since construction work requires much strength, we need lots of food. Aged people find it hard to work as helpers. In our country, work environment and system of work is not good, consequently, we need to work more. We do not get any rests; recruiters only push us to do more work” (Liton, 30, single).*

Another male construction worker, Durud, felt especially bad for female construction workers:



*“Women who work devotedly, their situation is pathetic. You will see their hands and feet are cracked, their skin is obnoxiously rough and they are suffering from premature aging. Women of this group work very hard, nevertheless, they do not get their wages on time. Conversely, women, who are the favourites of the rajmistris, get their wages on time without any hassle. I do not like it. I really feel pity for the hard working female co-workers” (Durud, 30, separated from wife).*

I observed that safety and health hazards exist on every construction site to varying degrees. In addition to the risk of accidents, continuous inhalation of cement dust and the mixing of cement with bare hands, without any protective measures, such as masks and gloves, increase workers’ vulnerability to ill health. Bharara et al. (2012) demonstrated that female construction workers often suffer from different diseases and physical problems, for example, severe muscular pain, fevers, cough and colds, pneumonia, tuberculosis and so on. This observation was supported by the concerns of my participants. An overwhelming majority of my participants maintained that female workers need to do kinds of work which cause them to suffer from asthma and severe skin problems including chronic severe infections.

### **Men’s and women’s views about women’s paid employment**

As previously articulated, in Bangladeshi society women’s participation in paid employment is still constrained by norms of *pardah*. In addition to *pardah*, the notions of shame and honour are also widely valued, where family’s *izzat* (honour) is thought to be associated with its female members’ behaviour and actions (Kabeer 1991; Gardner 1995b). In patriarchal societies women’s paid employment is often considered as a failure of the male members of their respective households to discharge their provider roles. Women’s employment outside the home may also be deemed threatening because of they mingle with non-kin men (Karim 2008). As a result, women’s engagement in physical labour in the public sphere at times brings considerable shame and stress for their households and is seen to tarnish the status of men and wider family (White 1992; Kabeer 1994). Women themselves also suffer from a loss of status (Mahmud 1997). However, studies conducted on female garment factory workers have demonstrated that

the advent of garment factories in Bangladesh and the corollary of massive female employment in this sector has contributed to greater acceptance of women's employment and their visibility in the public sphere (Rahman 2010; Khosla 2009; Kabeer 1997). Contrary to these observations, I found that women's increased paid work and visibility in public within the construction sector in my study thus far at best seems to have had limited impact on men's perspectives regarding gender ideology. Existing gender norms and values continue to remain influential in men's worldview and so they still find women's paid work objectionable. Perhaps surprisingly, men who were either unmarried or whose wives were not engaged in paid work were most likely to hold negative views regarding women's entry into the labour market. The comments below illustrate this observation:

*“I do not want women to do physical labour outside the home for money. Women of my extended family work in offices. I do not find it bad but no one [woman] of my family works in public as a wage labourer” (Rezan, 33, married to a housewife).*

It appears that men are still heavily influenced by the powerful cultural message that men's and women's worlds should be demarcated and as such women's presence in the public sphere continues to be seen as problematic by many men. Raju, a male participant, clearly expressed his discontent over women's work on construction sites. He did not like women's presence in this sector as they work with unfamiliar men, mingle with them rather freely and flirt with male co-workers behind the back of their husbands. Another unmarried male participant, Faruque, was not against women's work per se, nonetheless, he was against women's paid employment in the male dominated spheres. In fact, he was only in favour of the kind of paid employment deemed suitable for women by society. Another male participant, Durud, held a rather respectful and sympathetic view towards female construction workers as they were earning an “honest” living by working very hard. Roab, with a construction worker wife, offered a more complex view of women's paid employment, highlighting his own limitations to emerge as a capable breadwinner for the family. His comment clearly illustrates how some men's personal circumstances lead them to take a more pragmatic approach:

*“I have no other option but to support women's entry into paid employment. Women's paid employment is beneficial for their family. Women know how to save some money*

*from your tiny income in order to spend it in times of crisis” (Roab, 47, married to a beti jogali).*

A vast majority of male participants were against women’s participation in construction and accordingly they were unwilling to facilitate a female worker’s entry into this sector. They feared the likelihood of getting involved in potential problems encountered by the concerned female worker. Most of them also considered women’s employment in the construction sector as a slight not only on male family members but also on their male acquaintances’ status. Mahbub and Bazlu thus went further to dissociate themselves from familiar female construction workers saying that they were not ready to maintain any social relationship with them.

Jamal, an unmarried worker, would not marry a female construction worker. His account clearly mirrors how women’s personal reputation and family status are negatively associated with employment in general but with particular levels of paid work more specifically; and this is especially so for unmarried women. Faruque’s statement demonstrated a similar reservation about a future wife’s paid employment and indicates that access to an income does not necessarily enhance women’s bargaining ability. Rather a family’s inability to keep their marriageable daughter out of the labour market causes a loss to that family’s status (Mahmud 1997; Kabeer 1994). Liton, a male construction worker, supported women’s paid employment only in unavoidable circumstances, which strengthens the assumption that women’s work is still seen as an ‘aberration’ by many people (Seidler 1997).

Female construction workers themselves also seemed to believe that the public sphere is a man’s realm and women should have little to do with it. It emerged from the comments of the female participants of this study that social sanctions have profound impacts on women’s thought patterns, which can lead them to associate their economic independence with discontent. Women who were from relatively well-off families but eventually had to take paid employment for survival, felt more vulnerable and even ashamed of their identity as ‘workers’. As a result, they were less likely to take much pleasure in paid work. Morzina considered herself unlucky as her husband neither made a significant financial contribution to the household nor did he possess the desire to do so. Her comment portrayed women workers’ feelings:

*“I am from a religious family. My family members offer people religious education and I am working on the street. I cannot face my near and dear ones. I am ill-fated and this is why my husband is worthless. Had I been lucky, he would have taken care of me” (Morzina, 32, married).*

The participants’ views demonstrate that women’s paid employment is still seen as the last resort to maintain their subsistence, not something that accrues women more status in the current socio-cultural context. Irrespective of their gendered identity, participants considered women’s work as derogatory, which reflects people’s deep rooted admiration/approval towards housewifery and the norm of seclusion. As a result, even when women take employment to combat dire economic needs, their identity as a member of the labour force nevertheless encounters strong disapproval from both male co-workers and wider society (Geschwender 1992). I would argue that this disapproval not only undermines women’s conviction for economic autonomy but facilitates male control in the public sphere, which serves to reinforce patriarchy.

### **Divisions of labour at work: women at the bottom**

It is widely believed that women’s work rates have been increasing in Bangladeshi society throughout the last three decades (Halim 2004; BBS 2009). This increase has not, however, overcome enduring patterns of job segregation, whereby women are confined to particular segments of the labour market and more often than not excluded from or underrepresented in the better paid jobs and occupations (Kreimer 2004; Hakim 1996). Rather women are often hired into jobs that are less desirable and once a job becomes associated with women, it tends to be attributed less value (Tomaskovic-Devey 1995). Byrne et al. (2005) in their study on Western Europe found that gender based discrimination and deprivation at work are particularly evident in the construction sector. Munster and Strumpell’s (2014) study in India finds the economic restructuring process is particularly linked to gender alongside other categories, such as caste, ethnicity and social inequalities of class. Carswell and De Neve (2014) commented that gender inequalities continue to be an important aspect of south Indian political economy. For example, young women have less access than young men to better

opportunities in powerloom and garment sectors. The study also demonstrates that married women face barriers to taking paid employment outside the home due to their maternal responsibilities. Moreover, caste identity often plays an important role in further marginalisation of women of lower castes.

Studies conducted with female garment factory workers in Bangladesh observed that factories prefer to employ female workers as they constitute cheap labour and are thought to be more dexterous (Paul-Majumder and Begum 2000). According to Rahman (2010), general managers in garment factories who are responsible for the total production and shipment process are always men. The cutting section of a factory is also under the headship of a man and under this man other male workers cut fabrics, and both male and female workers assist them. The study also reveals that in all cases managerial posts, such as production manager, line manager and supervisor, are exclusively dominated by men; whilst sewing machine operators and helpers are predominantly female. This clearly reflects the gendered nature of factory employments in Bangladesh. In factories women are customarily placed in positions that involve lower technological skills while men are located in more technology intensive tasks, which affords them better wages than women (Kabeer 2004; Kabeer and Mahmud 2004; Rashid 2006; Rahman 2010). According to the most recent available statistics, only 1.3 million women compared with 5.5 million men are involved in the formal sector jobs in Bangladesh; while the informal sector is comprised of 32.4 million men and 14.9 million women respectively (BBS 2011). These statistics demonstrate women's massive concentration in informal sector jobs. However, I could find no detailed gender disaggregated data to more specifically highlight men's and women's disproportionate concentration in particular sectors and following differential wage levels in the Bangladeshi labour force. As mentioned previously, in Bangladesh 2.6 million people are engaged in the construction sector and among these a significant number are women. Studies carried out in Bangladesh (Kabeer 2004; Kabeer and Mahmud 2004; Rashid 2006; Rahman 2010) found that in factories men are perceived to be better suited for jobs that are somehow technology intensive; in the same vein, I found this to be the case for the construction sector in Bangladesh. The vertical job segregation in construction is endemic where female construction workers are systematically situated in an especially vulnerable position, concentrated at the bottom of the occupational

hierarchy, in the labour intensive, risk prone, non-technical, and lower paid positions. Conversely, men dominate the higher status and higher paid positions.



Male construction workers claimed that men do the most complicated and difficult jobs on construction sites; while women only work as ‘jogali’ and do certain tasks. Not all men equally share attributes such as strength, developed muscles, greater productivity, courage or risk taking and so forth, yet the majority of male participants appeared to believe that men as a group essentially do possess such attributes and these make men superior to women as a group. Clearly both men’s and women’s individual strength and productivity often varies significantly, with their age and personal circumstances, yet male participants’ narratives indiscriminately assert male supremacy over their female counterparts. Perhaps the influence of existing dominant social myths about male strength and power has overwhelmed men in a way that even in their unconscious mind they seem to believe being male equates to being superior. Raju’s comment clearly reflects this:

*“Women are jogalis in the construction sector, which means they are confined to only one type of work in this sector. It is often said that there is no difference between beta and beti jogalis but in practice some differences exist. For example, only a few women can climb stairs carrying a large bag of cement whilst most men can do that” (Raju, 26, married to a housewife).*



My observation does not bear a resemblance to Raju's comment as I saw that women were routinely discriminated against in the construction sector mainly for their gendered identity and the prevailing rhetoric about men's and women's dissimilar physical ability to produce work. I witnessed a female construction worker climbing stairs carrying as many as 12 bricks on her head, while some men were seen to carry 8-9 bricks at a time. Only a few strong men are able to climb stairs while carrying a bag full of cement, and after carrying a bag they generally take rest for some time. Women, conversely, in most cases divide a cement bag in two portions and carry them without taking a break. In terms of productivity women are not behind men; even *sardars* and contractors also admit that they often get better outcomes by employing women. So the claim made by male workers about their female counterparts' capacity to work hard appears to emanate largely from the dominant patriarchal myths, rather than the grounded reality.

### **Women's mobility is constrained by their gendered identity**

Siltanen and Stanworth (1984) and Kreimer (2004) argue that segregation in the labour market along gender lines is nothing but the continuation and extension of unequal gender relations in the family. According to Hartman (1976) sex segregation, unequal pay and exclusion of women from certain jobs, all are aimed to achieve the same purpose of limiting women's access to economic resources and maintaining their dependence on men. Mackintosh (1984) argues that societies structured on the basis of gender express, embody and perpetuate female subordination. As a result, in the sphere of paid employment women tend to be segregated in certain 'feminised' jobs and occupations. Women also internalise from the beginning of their lives that they are only suitable for certain tasks and transgressing this boundary is a deviation. As Dex (1985:101) argues, historically men have retained control and excluded women from working on certain jobs usually thought to be more skilled.

I observed female workers are constantly reminded of their lower worth and unequal position in the construction sector by paying them less and attributing lower value to their labour than men for the same job. In line with Feldberg and Glenn (1984) I would argue that women's responses to employment are the outcome of their locations and hierarchies and other structural features of the workplace. Noorjahan's account explained how women restrict their own access to better opportunities and limit themselves to 'female jobs':

*"I do not want to learn the skills of a rajmistri. I am happy that I can earn some money by working as a jogali. I do not want to work in the construction sector for a long time. Had my husband been contributing to the family, I would have left this work and gotten back to my job as a domestic helper"* (Noorjahan, 34, married, a mother of 5).

Mahbub's statement on women's vertical mobility in the construction sector mirrored the general view of the majority of male construction workers in this study:

*"Women do not show any interest in learning the skills of a rajmistri. However, I do not think they will be able to learn this work. Work on construction sites is increasingly becoming difficult. Now people usually build tall buildings and rajmistris sometimes*



*need to hang on the makeshift stairs made of rope and bamboo sticks to carry out their work. Women would not be able to manage working at that height. Moreover, women in this sector are mostly unschooled so they would not understand the design, planning and other measurement related issues, which is also a major predicament of women's success in this sector"* (Mahbub, 52, *rajmistri* and contractor, married to a housewife).

Another *rajmistri*, Monzurul, maintained that learning the skills requires effort and determination that he did not believe women possessed. According to him, women are like rolling stones who often change their loyalty for slightly enhanced wages and do not hesitate to work with new employers every time. He, however, added that if they wanted to learn and worked with the same *rajmistris* for longer, they could also become *rajmistris*.

Gender segregation and women's concentration in certain feminised jobs not only reflects negatively on women's position in the labour market but also affects people's perceptions. Jamal, who never saw a *beti rajmistri* (female head construction worker), easily fell victim to the propaganda that women are unable to learn new skills and are therefore unsuited to achieving vertical mobility. He even went further to assume that women lack the ambition to move further in their lives, he believed that they just work for a while and want to get their wages at the end of the day. Khason, who had a construction worker wife, however, believed that women could learn these skills, but highlighted the social obstacles that would preclude their attainment of vertical mobility:

*"Female construction workers cannot become rajmistris. Since people are not accustomed to seeing women as rajmistris, contractors will not recruit a woman even if she is an expert worker. Male construction workers do not want female construction workers to be rajmistris. Societal norms do not encourage women to learn, otherwise, there would have been many beti rajmistris"* (Khason, 41, married to a *beti jogali*).

Moinul, a *rajmistri*, also articulated his doubt that society may not accept a woman as *rajmistri* and may express disbelief in her ability to perform the job well (see Barnabas et al. 2009). Another male construction worker, Raju, supplemented that women are well aware of society's reservation; they know learning new skills will not facilitate

their vertical mobility. He believed this reality puts women off striving for mobility. Roab also illuminated the covert social constraints that act as obstacles to prevent female construction workers from striving for a better position:

*“My wife could learn the skills to be a rajmistri or could become a sarder but all these require constant communication with the people involved in this sector. If she starts communicating with unfamiliar men, people of our neighbourhood and my acquaintances will be saying that they saw my wife with unattached men. It is the main obstacle for women wanting to develop their career, they cannot proceed the way they want, rather, they need to restrain their desires thinking about the social consequences of challenging the established norms” (Roab, 47, married to a beti jogali).*

Female workers I spoke to also echoed these views and explained how the social structure and gender segregated nature of the labour market lead men and women workers to think in certain ways. Shaheda, a female participant, explained she did not want to learn the skills of a *rajmistri* because society would not like it. She thought people would say “if you want to do things like a man then why you are not transforming yourself into a man”. This attitude of male co-workers in particular and society in general leads many female workers to categorically dismiss the idea of learning ‘skills’. Whilst participants of this study were aware of the fact that learning the ‘skills’ could facilitate their access to more income and help keep at bay some of the exhausting tasks, they were also aware that it was more problematic for them to do so as women. In Bangladesh due to the lack of opportunities to obtain formal training, construction sector apprentices are primarily dependent on the senior masons/*rajmistris*/ head construction workers to learn the masonry skills. A *rajmistri* generally disseminates his acquired skills to his younger co-workers based on personal relationships. According to Aleya, women’s desire to learn skills from *beta rajmistris* (male head construction workers) may expose them to further complications, such as sexual advances from the male co-workers:

*“We do not want to learn the work of a rajmistri. In order to learn work properly, you need to work with the same rajmistri for a long time. However, if you work with someone for a longer period, he would start behaving with you in a way as if you are his wife. It is very difficult to protect yourself from being sexually harassed when you*

*are working alone with a male co-worker, especially in a private place. This is why I do not even consider the possibility of learning more work” (Aleya, 35, married, mother of 5).*

Durud, a male worker, agreed with this view and more precisely cited the reasons, for instance, sexual harassment, and the rude and unkind behaviour of *beta rajmistris* put women workers off working with a particular *rajmistri* for a long period. Notwithstanding, Mahbub, a *rajmistri* and contractor, instead of blaming *beta rajmistris* for their inappropriate behaviour, put the blame on female workers for not being compliant learners. He further justified his view adding that the *rajmistris* are like teachers so women workers must not feel bad if the *beta rajmistris* discipline them quite strictly.

However, I found that men and women are generally assigned different jobs in the construction sector and most of the employers tend to believe that women and men are suited to different tasks. For instance, women are good at breaking bricks and men are good at laying bricks; women carry loads while men cut earth. As Selwyn (2010) in her study of Brazilian farm workers found that farm managers used to provide universal explanations for existing divisions of labour: for example that the women had delicate fingers and were good at doing particular tasks, while men were physically stronger, and were more efficient at carrying out physically demanding tasks. I observed that similar rationalisations were employed by recruiters in the construction sector to keep women confined to certain activities in this sector. I would thus argue in line with Hartman (1976), Mackintosh (1984) and Walby (1997) that women want skilled jobs and better paid work just as much as men, but in a gendered segregated society like Bangladesh they are prevented from getting them by overt and covert discrimination in the public gender regime.

### **Wage discrimination is nothing but ‘natural’**

Contrary to the constitutional guarantee in Bangladesh, women continue to receive lower wages than men and the construction sector is no different. The gender pay gap is justified by employers and male workers by saying that women are not doing the same

work as men (BBS 2009; see Tomaskovic Devey 1995). All of my female participants provided information about gender based wage discrimination in their work:

*“I know men get more wages than us but we cannot do anything” (Noorjahan, 34, married, mother of 5).*

The prevalent belief of a ‘natural’ differentiation between men and women endorsed by socio-biological inferences continues to remain significant in explaining the perceived innate capacities and traits of both women and men (Elson and Pearson 1981 and 1984). In this ‘natural’ differentiation men are of course viewed as superior (Weston 1998). Comments made by the female participants in my study reinforce the findings that women’s gendered identity places them in a disadvantageous position in the wage labour market. Women perceive that most men get higher wages only on the basis of the fact that they are men. Hamida’s account obviously reflected how the perceived natural differentiation between men and women acts against women:

*“In our work everyone believes men work harder. It is not true. Although they climb stairs with heavy materials, they take rest frequently. No one asks them to speed up, on the other hand, we do not get rest. We need to run all the time. Still we get fewer wages than men and we cannot say anything because all the contractors, sardars and rajmistris are men” (Hamida, 46, widowed, mother of 3).*

In addition to this so called ‘natural’ differentiation between men and women workers, ‘sex stereotyping’ also discriminates against women and keeps them under constant scrutiny. Jorina, a female participant, illustrated her experience of ‘sex stereotyping’ in construction work:

*“If a man works even at a snail's pace, no one says anything, but if a woman works slowly, everyone says she is not working properly because she is a woman. Male workers often undermine our ability because we are women” (Jorina, 33, migrated leaving husband and 2 children in village home).*

The comment of Raju, a male construction worker, finds resonance with Feldberg and Glenn’s (1984) study which held that employers may be especially unpleasant towards

female workers. His comment also reveals employers try to extract as much labour as possible in return for as little pay as possible, which also concurs with Akter's (2005) study conducted in Bangladesh. The fear of unemployment often causes women workers to submit to higher rates of exploitation. A *rajmistri*, Monzurul, however, acknowledged how hard women often do work and hence are more beneficial for the employers. However, he also felt he was capable of differentiating between 'bad' and 'good' women are just by looking at them and he seems to believe that being forced into prostitution is an easy option:

*“Women work more as they are crippled by the fear of getting fired. They do not smoke, do not go for tea, so they work more. In addition, they want to impress the recruiters by working hard; that's why I often recruit women. If these women wanted, they could earn money by indulging in unfair means along sexual lines; instead of choosing such easy options, they are struggling to survive with this laborious construction work. They do not go to work in hotels because of the fear of rape and sexual repression. Not all women in construction work are bad. I can recognise those who are good and those who are bad by having a look at them” (Monzurul, 38, rajmistri, married to a housewife).*

Monzurul's comment clearly demonstrates that many men still hold a narrow, paternalistic and sexualised view regarding women's needs, power, efforts and aspirations, and they explain these in their own terms.

The majority of male participants of this study perceived that women are good at tedious jobs but they are behind men in terms of strength, which justifies their lower wages. Mahbub, a *rajmistri* and contractor, agreed that women are not behind men in terms of productivity; nevertheless, they are constrained by the cultural notion of being the bearer of the 'weak female body'; thus they receive fewer wages on the basis of this and find it hard to challenge the existing system. Female participants also reiterated a similar explanation to Mahbub, holding responsible the 'invisible' rules of the labour market behind the wage discrimination. Female participants claimed to know that according to the law of the land they should get equal wages, although they do not get equal payment for equal work. Some of them told me that a few times they raised the

issue of being deprived and demanded equal payments but the recruiters/*sardars* always silenced them by saying that women receive fewer wages than men; this is the system.

Lips (2013) noted, and in this study I also found that in the vein of their male counterparts women themselves also inherently believe in such socio-biological and religious myths and propaganda, which ultimately helps to perpetuate their secondary status, as Hasna's comment illustrates:

*"We do not say that women should get the equal wages of men, because men and women are not equal; men can carry more loads than women. We just repent and tell the male co-workers, "now you will get Tk 250 and we will get only Tk 200". Male co-workers say, "you become men, then you [female workers] will get even Tk 300 a day". God has created men and women differently so everything is different, including work and wages" (Hasna, 28, married, mother of 2 daughters).*

Some of the female participants identify the abundant female labour pool as the reason which effectively curtails their bargaining ability. However, though it is the case that both male and female labour is abundant in the labour market, women face greater deprivation as the male recruiters and middlemen use it as an excuse to pay less (Mahmud 1997). Nokhal, the youngest of my participants, challenged the idea of equal wages of men and women:

*"How come they could get equal wages? They cannot work hard like a man. I can carry so many things together and climb stairs with heavy loads but a female worker cannot carry as much as I do. They [female co-workers] cannot climb stairs with a full bag of cement but I can. I can break a wall but my female co-workers just carry away the rubbish, so how come they should get the same wages? Women can do only a part of men's job. They cannot do all the things that a man does" (Nokhal, 17, single).*

A similar feeling was expressed by Jalal who believed it is quite right that women and men do not get equal wages. Another male participant, Durud, noted that men and women do different jobs on construction sites and women are not able to accomplish different types of work like men. Yet he believed that women work very hard and on that basis he was in favour of equal wages.

In congruence with Elson and Pearson (1981 and 1984) I also argue that the perceived ‘innate’ differences of men and women are routinely used as a rationale to discriminate against women in the construction sector. I would also contest in line with Mackintosh (1984) that Bangladeshi society is so rigidly stratified on the basis of gender that women’s subordinate position in the labour market was equally ‘normalised’.

### **Young women get jobs more often: myth or reality?**

In Bangladeshi society the entrance of increasing numbers of women into the labour force is a relatively new experience. As a result, men who are not familiar with meeting women in a work situation may fallback on gender-based social expectations and treat their female co-workers as sexually available (Momsen 1993). Studies (e.g., Gutek and Morasch 1982; Gruber 1998) provided an explanation that ‘male biased sex ratios’ in the workplace often lead to sexual harassment of women. I found this to be the case in my study. A vast majority of female participants of this study reported sexual harassment in the workplace; especially young women in the construction sector who are in double trouble because of their age. On the one hand they are more vulnerable to sexual harassment from male co-workers, on the other, they are often blamed by their female co-workers for being sexually more desirable and hence with more potential to find jobs on a regular basis. One of the participants, Ayesha (53), blamed her age for not getting jobs regularly. Recruiters often rejected her saying that she would not work hard. She, however, believed it was not her ability to work but her biological age that deterred the recruiters. Another participant, Aklima (55), also deemed that she was discriminated against only because of her age and needed to prove her ability every time by working very hard. Like Ayesha and Aklima, Rehena believed age was an important factor in the recruitment process, she however strengthened her claim by referring to male co-workers who admitted bluntly to needing recreation in the workplace as they get bored with this strenuous work. Since they do not feel like flirting with older women, they need to recruit younger women. My observation also finds resonance with Aklima and Ayesha’s contention that relatively older workers’ performance is more likely to be under critical scrutiny as the recruiters tend to perceive that age affects workers’ productivity negatively. However, this is the case for both male and female

construction workers and I argue that the large labour pool in the construction labour market allows the recruiters to be particularly selective. Workers' reputation as efficient workers, previous experience of working with the same recruiter and so on often get reasonable considerations in the selection process. As mentioned earlier, the construction labour market has abundant labourers and the sector is largely, if not entirely, comprised of relatively younger labourers. As a result, labourers of all age cohorts routinely face uncertainty and joblessness, and the recruitment process cannot be explained *only* in the light of age. However, my observations also support the contention of my female participants that youth in one way or another gives female labourers an edge in particular forms of employment. Rokeya explained her view elaborately: in the construction sector young women are in greater demand, and *rajmistris* often hire young women since there is no scarcity of young women; if they hire young women, it is relatively easy for them to make sexual advances; moreover, *Rajmistris* think that young women are sexually more capable and acquiescent hence, it is more practical to seduce them. Nahar explained that young women not only get jobs more frequently, they receive better treatment in terms of free food and a more stress-free work environment than their older female counterparts:

*“The women who are young can find work every day. They flirt with the male co-workers and get leniency. Male co-workers treat them with tea and cookies. Sometimes they even provide lunch. We need to bring our lunch with us but some women can get it free from construction sites. Since I am not young, I am not able to entertain them. I do not have anyone who would recruit me every day” (Nahar, 42, deserted by husband).*

Both Sajeda and Hasna held a similar opinion to that of “older” female construction workers, in that recruiters prefer women who are “young, good looking, healthy, having big boobs and wear make-up”. Hasna explained how young women's physical appearance facilitates them to find jobs. She maintained women who are young, healthy, apply oil in their hair, dress up nicely and have fairer skin, get jobs almost every day; while women with broken health and darker skin find it hard to get work on a regular basis. Afia added, in addition to women's age, their efforts to look good and young help them to draw the attention of recruiters:



*“Now a good number of young women come to the congregating points wearing salwar-kameez and long dresses. They try to look good wearing nice clothes and keeping themselves clean; these women do not need to wait for work. In fact, as soon as they come to the points in the morning, they manage to get a job, while no one even asks us or look at us!” (Afia, 34, married for a 2<sup>nd</sup> time, mother of 6).*

According to Mahmuda, merely being good looking is not enough, being compliant with the wishes of recruiters is another required quality for a woman to be recruited as an assistant of a *rajmistri*. She went on to say women who worked before with a particular recruiter and did not abide by his wishes, had no chance at all to be recruited again. Assia offered a different aspect of recruitment strategy where recruiters deliberately recruit a few older and experienced workers. She illustrated on big construction sites contractors apply this policy to prevent male co-workers from getting sexually aggressive towards younger female co-workers and thereby avoid any serious sort of sex scandal on construction sites. Mahbub though, as a recruiter himself, denied the accusation of being biased on the basis of felicitousness and age; he nevertheless admitted his unwillingness to recruit older people:

*“I do not consider the age of women when I select them for work. I, however, refrain from hiring too old workers since they might get sick at the workplace, which would put me in further trouble” (Mahbub, 52, contractor and rajmistri, married to a housewife).*

Female construction workers’ comments regarding recruitment finds support by Giufre and Williams (2005) who also argue that workers in many jobs are hired on the basis of their physical beauty. In line with Momsen (1993), Gutek and Cohen (1987), and Gruber (1998) I would argue that the ‘sex skewed nature of the labour market’ and the resultant prevalent gender based expectation exposes women to more vulnerable situations in the public sphere.

### **“Good women do not face sexual harassment”**

Some scholars have demonstrated that a vast majority (70%) of employed women across the world have experienced behaviours that can be perceived as sexual

harassment (MacKinnon (1979), and Powell (1986) cited in Giufre and Williams 2005). Women working in open, public spaces and construction sites are subject to a wide range of dangers; the list includes sexual harassment, to grave offences such as rape (Kabeer 2008; Basu and Thomas 2009; Mosse 1993). Gutek and Morasch (1982) argued societies subscribe to a patriarchal gender ideology, and instead of blaming men for their sexually aggressive behaviour, tend to criticise women for their sufferings and press them to strictly adhere to the norms of *purdah* and fulfil all gender based expectations. As such, while loose behaviour on the part of men does not evoke much concern, parallel behaviours from women are unlikely to go unnoticed (Dube 1997). Karim (2008:10) in her study of female micro-credit borrowers in Bangladesh mentioned that women are the custodian of family honour. A deviation from what is deemed to be socially acceptable behaviour on the part of women brings shame to the whole family, and people routinely use a ‘discourse of honour’ such as ‘women of our family do not do this or that’ (e.g., talking or mingling with non-kin men, going to market place) to assert the honour (*izzat*) of their family. My male participants whose immediate female family members were not involved in paid employment outside the home also often used such discourse. It seemed even the rumour of engaging in minor sexual impropriety on the part of a woman is extremely damaging for herself and her family. Though men’s reputation is not likely to suffer from such public gossip, women often encounter serious disapproval by co-workers and acquaintances. Morzina, a female construction worker, therefore behaved carefully:

*“Male construction workers’ behaviour towards their female co-workers largely depends on our [female workers’] gesture and posture. If we flirt with male co-workers or smile at them, they would try to touch us indecently, which is natural. They [male co-workers] know who will receive their signals. We behave carefully. If I go to work alone, smile with the rajmistri, chat with him and allow him to touch me, he would take the chance to make sexual advances” (Morzina, 32, married).*

Some of the female participants believed that women can resist sexual advances if they wish but did not suggest it was the men who were the problem. They tended to believe that it is women’s responsibility to protect themselves from the inappropriate male gaze and if women want they can escape from different types of sexual harassment. Khason,

with a construction worker wife, shared a similar view and further added that he had warned his wife not to get involved in sexual labour:

*“I know there are many bad people in the construction sector. Nevertheless, I believe if my wife is honest, they [male co-workers] cannot violate her. If she finds that the co-workers are not good human beings and have bad intentions, she will not go to work with them the next time. I have told my wife not to earn money by adopting an unfair [sexual] means. She must not feed me and my children her deceitful income” (Khason, 41, married to a beti jogali).*

Stanko (1988) noted women who are the target of offensive sexual behaviour are often being blamed for experiencing such incidences. Mahbub believed that ‘good women’ do not encounter sexual harassment and went further to claim that women who complain about harassment are themselves not ‘good women’. Moinul also reiterated other male participants’ views presented above and overtly blamed women’s improper behaviour. He maintained women’s behaviour in the public sphere, such as lack of *purdah* observance, independent movement, and extra friendliness with men exposes them to sexual harassment. He claimed to witness many incidences where female construction workers flirt with men, crack jokes, and indulge in indecent chats with male co-workers. Jamal, a male construction worker, admitted however that some men were not nice to women workers, he, nevertheless, deemed women were equally responsible for that:

*“It does not mean that you can blame all male co-workers in a wholesale manner. I know a handful of women who got married a few times after joining the construction sector. Male construction workers establish relationships with women because they allow men to do so” (Jamal, 26, single).*

According to Khosla (2009), women regularly face sexual harassment both at the workplace and on streets. Ambia, a female construction worker, offered a more nuanced and mundane picture of women’s experience:

*“It is not that simple that if you are an honest woman, you will get respite from the lust of male co-workers. I am a mother of 6 children, so when I joined construction work, I thought no one would try to make sexual advances towards me. However, soon I was*

*proved wrong, I encountered sexual harassment and male co-workers tried to allure me showing money power. You know, when there is no food, people do not hesitate to eat leftovers; they do not try to judge good or bad, if they get something, at least it fulfils their need” (Ambia, married, mother of 6).*

It emerges from the perspectives of the participants that both men and women explicitly or implicitly, and consciously or unconsciously, transfer the responsibility for both the instigation and policing of workplace sexual harassment to women. In congruence with Kabeer (1991) I would say that the deep-rooted notions of shame and honour in patriarchal social contexts causes both men and women to hold the view that facing sexual harassment has something to do with the victims’ behaviour. Male participants particularly deem that lack of *pardah* observance on the part of women causes them to encounter sexual harassment, which clearly reflects that men continue to be resistant to women’s entry into the public sphere.

### **Do men feel betrayed?**

Globally more and more women are becoming engaged in the labour market and accordingly some studies demonstrate that the labour force is being feminised in certain fields (Standing 1989; Cagatay and Ozler 1995; Mehra and Gammage 1999; Ozler 2000). Some people tend to believe that women’s increasing access to paid work reflects negatively on men as ‘women steal men’s job and feminise them’ (Hakim 1996: 2), which further weakens men’s social and economic positions. A male construction worker, Nokhal, expressed his opinion and maintained he was not bothered if the recruiters wanted to employ women:

*“Recruiters [contractors, rajmistris] often recruit women workers to assist the rajmistris. I do not feel bad that women get preference in this type of work; it is the wish of the recruiters, they can recruit whoever they want” (Nokhal, 17, single).*

Like this young participant, Kacha, a more mature male participant, also claimed not to be concerned about the fact that recruiters sometimes prefer female workers over the males. Instead he appeared to feel proud perceiving that recruiters mostly recruit women

to save some money. He was well aware that in a highly competitive market where both male and female labourers were plentiful, recruitment of larger numbers of women means the opportunities for male workers to sell their labour power was compromised. Nevertheless, Kacha's male ego was happy to think that women get recruited more often than men because they are 'cheaper'. This thought not only gave him some kind of consolation but also a sense of being superior to women:

*"If a contractor hires a woman instead of me, I do not feel bad. I know it is all about money. Women can be paid less and that is why they hire women. A woman cannot work as much as a man does, because she is a woman. Women are cheaper than men, men are pricey"* (Kacha, 56, beta jogali, married to a domestic helper).

Women's increasing presence in the labour market benefits capitalism in many ways (Arizpe and Aranda 1986), and the Bangladeshi construction sector is no exception in this regard where female labour is utilised to reduce the cost of production. The labour-intensive nature of construction in Bangladesh means that cheap labour is an incentive for the builders to keep their costs low. Women's situatedness and compulsion for such employment because of their familial responsibilities do not allow them to think differently (see Safa 1986; Rahman 2010). Hasna presented her husband's point of view, according to whom women have a greater demand in the labour market as they are perceived as sex objects by the recruiters. This comment not only undermines women's ability and expresses disrespect but demonstrates men's feeling of being betrayed:

*"I sometimes request my husband to live with me and join construction work, which will facilitate us to earn a better living. He says, "who is going to hire me for work? These men [recruiters] will only recruit you because they can flirt with you""* (Hasna, married, 28, mother of 2 daughters).

### **Women's experience as workers**

Female construction workers are usually engaged in the lowest tier of this sector which causes them to perform only physically demanding tasks. Participants of this study

agreed that construction work is extremely arduous as they were going through difficult physical and emotional phases. They, however, found the job even harder as beginners. Most female participants reported the experience of physical abuse alongside verbal abuse as a newcomer. One of the female participants, Sheba, elucidated her experience of encountering annoyed co-workers and the ensuing feeling of worthlessness. She further added that newcomers are generally asked to do the most physically demanding works, but both the workers and their work are treated as ‘unskilled’. Participant *rajmistris* also concur with these views and added that when a *jogali* gets familiar with this work, he or she can take respite from work by using different means including passing on their heaviest work to the beginners. Irrespective of gender, people who are new in the construction sectors are expected to do the toughest jobs since they cannot refuse to do anything because of the fear of losing the contract. However, veteran workers somehow manage to dodge such tasks and perform relatively less painful tasks.

Construction workers generally work for a long time; sometimes they even work until midnight. They mix cement with other materials, break bricks, carry large *kodai* (bowls) full of a muddy mixture, carry sacks full of cement or soil, pour the mixture into the machine and do many other things. My female participants recounted, earlier the *kodai* was not as big as it is now, contractors nowadays use large *kodais* and it is hard to carry a large *kodai* full of cement and chips. When they make roofs, it requires them to pour the mixture into the machine continuously. Construction workers involved in the roof making task rarely get the chance to stop working for a while or chew *pan-supari*. They just need to keep pouring materials and remain very busy. Feroza, another female construction worker, explained their busy schedule on construction sites:

*“Female workers generally do not get the opportunity to take rest for a while during work hours. If the rajmistris/sarders see a woman worker taking a break, he will say, “why are you sitting idle? Have you come here to sit? Go and get this cement bag, or clean the floor, or remove these construction materials from here”. They [recruiters] do not allow us to catch a breath. However, they are not similarly strict with our male co-workers” (Feroza, 37, widowed).*

A similar experience of Feroza was narrated by Minara who also claimed women workers are more vulnerable to recruiters’ pressure than male workers. Women workers

shed light on the issue that they are often reminded that they are not working for free and they must prove their worthiness by remaining busy with work. Female construction workers' views were supported by Feldberg and Glenn (1984), who noted that regardless of men's and women's positions in the organisation, they experience dissimilar forms of social controls and the controls impinged on women are more strict and pretentious in nature.

Rehena explained how women's work experiences are interrelated to their male co-workers' traits and moods. According to her, *rajmistris* who are nice, allow their female co-workers to take some rest on and off and do not pressurise them too much to produce more and more work; they also do not use harsh words regularly and indiscriminately. If the *rajmistris* are rude, they keep the workers under constant pressure and rebuke them for nothing. Another female construction worker, Mina, described the rude treatment they receive from *sarders* and/or contractors in case they feel unwell in the workplace. Contractors and/or *sarders* not only use offensive language to them but also ask them not to go to work the next day. Studies (e.g., Heyzer 1989; Kabeer 1997; Dannecker 2002) found that factory women often covertly defy such managerial control by mocking and ridiculing the authority. I found the same in this study and Mina's comment strengthened my observation. She told me in case of inconsiderate behaviour from recruiters, she would also retort and tell them that she would not die if she did not work with them. However, just as Heyzer (1989) contests that such defiance does not seem to improve women's situation, I would argue the same. Assia shed light on the techniques employed by the recruiters to realise more work from female workers:

*“The majority of people in our work are terrible, only a tiny number of people behave nicely. Most sarders and rajmistris abuse us verbally, find faults and threaten us to cut the wages for trivial matters. They say, “you did not work well today, lots of things to be done, what did you do the whole day?” They purposively make us stay in the workplace for long and ask us to finish everything no matter how long it takes” (Assia, 29, migrated leaving husband back in home).*

Assia's observation was supported by Rahman (2010) who contested that women workers' apparent submissiveness enables managers to exert more control over them through diverse strategies and practices. Mahmuda supplemented further Assia's

account and elucidated how *rajmistris* make them stay on construction sites until very late, which not only extracts their labour power unjustly but exposes them to the risk of sexual harassment:

*“Most of the rajmistris deliberately ask beti jogalis to mix the materials [for plastering and brick laying] very late in the afternoon and continue working until midnight. As a jogali you cannot leave construction site unless the rajmistri allows you to go. If you request him to let you go, he would ask you not to go to work the next day” (Mahmuda, 35, married, mother of 6).*

More than three decades ago Gutek and Morasch (1982) commented that the power gap between male and female workers plays an important role in sexual harassment faced by women in the workplace. Since men are generally located in superior positions and able to use organisational power more easily, they often force women into ‘granting sexual favours which may include engaging in sexual activity’ (Gutek and Morasch 1982:57). I argue that the situation has not changed much. Swapna lucidly explained how women workers face problems in working as a *jogali* of a *rajmistri*. She maintained that in addition to the physical pain of arduous construction work, female workers need to bear the pain inflicted on them by the attitude and behaviour of male co-workers who often try to make sexual advances. Amena’s account vividly describes the improper sexual acts committed by male workers against their female co-workers:

*“Male co-workers deliberately push us on our back and touch us without necessity. If we try to raise our voice, they say if you are such a dignified woman, why don’t you stay at home? Why do you come to construction sites to allure men?” (Amena, 23, married, mother of 2).*

In addition to different sorts of pressure and sexual harassment, women routinely face many other issues which are directly or indirectly associated with their identity as ‘female’ workers. Coomi who was vocal against workplace sexual harassment felt that recruiters did not wish to recruit her for her non-compliant nature, rather often censured her as an arrogant worker. Afia’s narrative captured the feelings of fear, anxiety and doubt that most of the female construction workers go through:



*“As a woman I go to work every time with a feeling of fear. Whenever I get work, I need to think whether to go with this recruiter? Is he a nice person? What would I do if someone tries to violate me? What would happen if I get trapped by people who are involved in women trafficking?” (Afia, 34, married for a 2<sup>nd</sup> time, mother of 6).*

Female construction workers’ negative experiences of sexual harassment create fear among them and make them more insecure. My observation suggests the stories of sexual assaults are so well disseminated among workers that women who are new in this sector or claim not to have yet encountered serious problems, still feel anxious and expect that they will do so at some point. Especially those women who are young and new in construction work find it more difficult to cope with diverse forms of sexual harassment. Although female participants of this study who were new in this sector seemed to be very careful in choosing their co-workers, they hardly could escape offensive language and behaviour because on large construction sites workers come from different places, most of whom do not know each other. Participants of this study told me that they would feel less confident to work with unfamiliar men as they often would anticipate aggressive behaviour from them. Rahima, a female construction worker, narrated the helpless picture of women’s experience of sexual harassment in the workplace. She observed in construction work, *rajmistris* treat female workers in a way as if they are the wives of those *rajmistris*. They keep female workers busy even with the smallest things and ask them to pass on the tools to them even if it is within close reach. With a heavy heart she murmured that no one respects an unfamiliar woman, hence those men do not hesitate to say whatever they feel like. Even she believed that their male co-workers think so lowly of them that they tend to consider them “prostitutes”. Rabu vividly described one of her workplace experiences where she was being seduced by her male co-workers:

*“If you believe in people straightforwardly, you will be in trouble. Sometimes it happened that I worked half of the day without any problem then the rajmistri came to me and told me that you were supposed to get Tk 200; I will give you 200 more. Come with me, I have something important to do! If you rely on him and go with him, he will abuse you. I cannot even think about screaming on such occasions because of the fear of izzat” (Rabu, 33, widowed, mother of 3).*

Feroza's story also reinforces Rina's and Rahima's views that male workers often seduce their poor female co-workers by offering them money. Sheba offered an explanation as to why male workers are desperate to establish sexual relations with female co-workers:

*“On construction sites most of the men are living without their wives and always try to be extra friendly with female co-workers. I am a young woman without a husband, as soon as my male co-workers get to know it they start asking me different questions. If I answer rudely, they just drop me from work and if I reply politely, they try to come uncomfortably close” (Sheba, 28, deserted by husband, mother of 4).*

When I was carrying out my fieldwork in 2011 and 2012, a rumour was in the air that a woman who was a newcomer in construction went to work in a big building and was killed. The victim was new in this sector hence she did not know how to protect herself in the face of sexual advances made by male co-workers. One of my participants, Rokeya, claimed that the *rajmistri* separated the victim from her female co-worker, took her to a bathroom inside the building in the name of work, tried to have sex and when failed, angrily pushed a “*konni*” (a sharp metal instrument) in her vagina. The woman died from her wounds. Circulation of this story created fear and mistrust among female construction workers and I found that women became very selective about recruiters and male co-workers. However, participant women's comments made it evident that female workers always remain careful about their own behaviour: that they should neither enrage co-workers nor give them the message that they are too friendly, because too much friendliness can also be misunderstood by their male co-workers and well-wishers (see Saal 1996).

The majority of female participants echoed Sheba's comment and maintained that they felt helpless in the workplace. They perceived that women's physical appearance and age exposed them to more vulnerable situations. Sexual harassment on the part of male co-workers was taken for granted by most of the female participants. They alleged that their male co-workers often touched them unbecomingly and gave them meaningful looks. Some of the participants claimed women who are relatively old and not “good looking” can avoid sexual harassment with fewer difficulties. Shaheda, a female participant, highlighted that female construction workers are not only susceptible to

harassment in the workplace by male co-workers. They are also exposed to harassment by other men on streets and even in neighbourhoods, because of the widespread belief that women who work in male dominated spheres lack sexual dignity (See Mosse 1993; Momsen 1993 and 2010; Khosla 2009).

### **Exploitations and deceptions are ubiquitous**

Comments made by the female participants of this study reveal that apart from poor working conditions, laborious work, widespread gender-based discrimination, and ubiquitous sexual harassment, women are also vulnerable to being cheated by the middlemen. On many occasions they fail to realise their wages after a whole day of work. One of the participants, Kanchon, narrated her story of being cheated by her recruiter:

*“A few weeks ago, along with another woman I went to work in a remote place. After finish working, we were waiting for our wages; the man who recruited us asked us to wait for a while as he said he did not have the change to give us the money. He also wanted to use my cell phone and I, in good faith, allowed him to do so. We kept waiting for the man at a tea shop for hours but he did not show up. When it became very dark, people of the shop told us that the man cheated on us and it was meaningless to wait for him” (Kanchon, 36, married for a 2<sup>nd</sup> time, mother of a son).*

Naju, Fateha and Noorjahan also described the experience of facing similar kinds of problems in realising their wages. Noorjahan added that some of the recruiters just disappear suddenly when the time comes to pay the wages. Coomi also restated the story of being cheated. Female construction workers in most cases lose a portion of their wages because the middlemen/*sardars* appropriate this amount. Sometimes workers do not receive their wages after finishing the work; if the contract continues for a few weeks, they often get their payments at the end of the work. In this way workers usually fail to realise the wages for each day they work. According to Coomi, if they work for 2 weeks, they lose at least 2-3 days' wages but cannot protest because of the fear of not being recruited in the future by the same recruiter. Rokeya and Mina however told me that they would cast a curse on the recruiters or *sardars* for their ill motive and console

themselves in this way. However the situation of female construction workers is not unique. Female factory workers in Bangladesh also routinely face various undesirable situations in realising their payments: irregularities and delay in payments, non-payment of overtime bills with wages are not uncommon phenomena in this sector (Rahman 2010).

Breman (2010) found that cane cutters in India often fail to receive their full wages as the payment is often delayed. In addition, workers' limited knowledge and bargaining ability as migrants, and middlemen's shrewdness in contingent hinder their ability to raise voice and realise their actual wages. Harriss-White's (2003) study in India also shows that women in the labour market are facing discrimination in all possible ways and in most cases they earn much less than men. Shah's (2006) study of migrant workers on brick kilns in India reveals that workers themselves anticipate that they might be cheated. Guerin et al. (2007) mentioned that due to their (workers') lack of knowledge about piece-rate and the actual amount of work they do during a certain timespan, the brick kiln workers often remain anxious over the issue of being cheated on their pay. Hondagneu-Sotelo's (1997) study conducted on Mexican immigrant women in the USA also articulated deception over pay arrangements. Patel (1990) found that in the construction sector in India middlemen are present everywhere, which substantially increases construction workers' plight. Some other studies carried out in India, for instance, Desai (2003) and Pattanaik (2009), also hold a similar contention and perceive construction workers' socioeconomic and personal circumstances as the major causes which constrain them from bravely bargaining with the tricky middlemen in this sector.

Participant female construction workers though apparently having conflicting interests with their male co-workers, reported sharing light moments both at congregating points and construction sites, during tea and lunch breaks. It was observed that some sort of friendships or relationships of convenience were nurtured both by male and female workers. On some occasions female workers mingled with male co-workers as a necessary component of the working environment. Some of them reported socialising with co-workers to ensure their cooperation at work and having more access to work related information. A few of them further illuminated that they consciously extended friendship to a few male co-workers to get their support to obtain their due wages from

shrewd *sarders*, to feel a bit more secure in the workplace, and to face other co-workers who were rather unfriendly. My observations also suggest that there is a good deal of sociability and conviviality maintained by both male and female workers in congregating points and construction sites. Joking and flirting by male and female workers are common. As I mentioned before, the way men and women mingle with each other, stand or sit in close proximity, cut jokes and share pain, pleasure and laughter in their work situation is somewhat remarkable in the context of Bangladesh. A small number of my female participants, who were widowed or deserted, considered the friendly relationships with male co-workers as a source of mitigating their inner loneliness. However, it would be incorrect to comment that only women without husbands enjoy the flirtious relationships. In fact, I found that married women also often got involved in casual flirting and joking, though they always remained careful about their husbands' displeasure. One of my widowed participants shyly told me that she enjoyed it greatly when male co-workers and employers pursued flirtatious relationships with her. Another widowed participant, Julfa, also reiterated a similar feeling of pleasure and added that in the workplace the lives of construction workers are entirely different. In her words:

*“In the workplace we freely share many feelings and many happiness with male co-workers, which we do not often able to do even with our husbands. We do and say many things with our male co-workers as if we are husbands and wives. These men, however, do not visit us in our house nor do we visit them. Our relationships are limited in the workplace. Life is different in our home environments. At night I am lonely... I do not have any husband” (Julfa, 38, widowed, mother of 3).*

## **Conclusion**

Overall the construction sector as a workplace continues to be problematic for the majority of female participants. All female participants identified consistent forms of harassment and discrimination they experienced, which included: treatment based on stereotyped sex roles, wage differentials, having to work harder to prove themselves, and exploitation and deception by the middlemen. Though Walby provided analyses of European societies I found this equally applicable to the labour market in Bangladesh,

where occupational segregation is deliberately maintained and used against women to weaken their fallback position and thereby strengthen the patriarchal power in all aspects of life. ‘Sex stereotyping’ (Young 1988) in the labour market continues to be widespread and discrimination on the basis of gender is nothing but ‘natural’. The comments made by the male participants reinstate the claim that visibility of women in the labour market is not enough to change people’s consciousness. The majority of the participants still believe that home is the “right and proper” place for women. Women’s participation seems to receive positive notes only from those male participants who are direct beneficiaries of it. I would, nevertheless, argue that the increased participation of women in the labour force has laid the foundation stone for greater equality between men and women in the workplace. The environment of construction sites has been changed, at least to some extent, by women’s increasing presence, which was almost exclusively masculine even two decades ago.

I also contest that there is, as yet at least, no evidence of the feminisation of workforce at the expense of male jobs; women in the construction sector were essentially restricted to female stereotyped jobs, where they only worked as *jogalis*. Women in the construction sector are primarily recruited because they constitute ‘cheap, docile, and dispensable labour’ (Kabeer 1991:134). Though it emerged from women’s narratives that they face social, economic, physical and psychological exploitation and abuse in the labour market, they neither can ‘exit’ nor raise their ‘voices’ as they are constrained by their weak fallback position; which only reinforces their vulnerability and exposes them to further exploitation and deprivation. Women’s relative precarious position in the labour market is not limited to the workplace, rather it is effectively linked with their position in the domestic sphere. While women’s subordinate position in the home places them at a disadvantageous position in the labour market, correspondingly their restricted bargaining capacity in the workplace reinforces their subordinate position in the home. Women seeing themselves in an inferior position in both public and private spheres tend to believe that it is ‘normal’ for women to occupy a subordinate status. Although many scholars (e.g., Lim 1983; 1990 and 1997b; Krugman 1997; Meyer 2006) deem that greater absorption of women into the labour market paves the way to achieving gender equity, taking into account the comments of the participants, we cannot straightforwardly claim this to be the case for Bangladeshi female construction workers. The women I interviewed were forced to take paid employment in order to earn a living

for themselves and their family; it was not their deliberate choice. Furthermore, the terms and conditions under which they worked were also essentially denigrating.

However, it would be incorrect to conclude that female construction workers are merely the passive recipients of the exploitations and deprivations imposed upon them by male co-workers, recruiters and middlemen. Engaging in paid employment to some extent provides the material basis for female workers to assert a certain degree of control, albeit on an individualised level. In Chapter VIII, I will elaborate how women's employment facilitates them to use agency at an individual level. Nevertheless, I contest in its present form the work experiences for female construction workers are on the whole exploitative and discriminatory.

## **Chapter VII: Female income, cultural values and private patriarchy**

In this chapter I explore Bangladeshi female construction workers' views and experiences regarding inter and intra-household gender relations in the context of their waged employment. I have paid a great deal of attention to the analysis and description of the perceptions of the husbands' of female construction workers about their wives' paid employment and marital power relations. I also have focused on male construction workers' perspectives on women's status in society, especially, wives' position in the home. Gender analyses of households are incomplete if both men's and women's voices are not incorporated. Interviews of male participants further suggests elimination of any 'female bias', at least to some extent, besides enabling more nuanced understandings of the changing gendered role- relations in the private sphere.

As elucidated in previous chapters, empirical research conducted in different parts of the world looking at the implications of women's paid employment on gender relations has revealed mixed outcomes. Similarly theorists have also offered diverse views regarding the relations between resources and domestic authority. Resource theory posits that the relative resources of the spouse (e.g., income, education, occupational status) are the most important determinants of marital power relations (Blood and Wolfe 1960). Theorists who adhere to this view maintain that in marital relationships partners with greater resources can escape housework using their power while partners with fewer resources are more likely to be compelled to bear the burden of arduous familial tasks. Resource theory, however, faced considerable criticism for drawing simplistic causal relations between relative resources and bargaining position as it has been well established by now that access to resources does not necessarily conflate with control of resources and they may not award women greater power. Moreover women's capacity to assert their authority and utilise the options available to them are seen to be constrained by their personal circumstances, household composition, gender ideology, cultural norms and practices of the society in which they live (Komter 1989; Kibria 1995; Ramalingaswami et al. 1996; Lim 1997a; Agarwal 1997; Tichenor 1999; Kabeer 2000; Vera-Sanso 2000). Blumberg's (1991) theory of gender stratification thus noted that access to an independent income does not automatically confer women greater status within the home unless they can establish control over the resources. Blumberg



argues that in a hierarchical society men, in general, are more powerful in society's 'macro structure' (e.g., state, public sphere), and men's greater control within the macro structure efficiently reduces and undermines women's contribution in the 'micro structure' (e.g. private sphere) of the society. Sen's (1990) argument of 'perceived contribution response' also finds resonance with Blumberg where he argues that women's contribution is often discounted both by men and women as it is perceived as less important. Sen (1981) also maintains entitlements and endowments are gender-specific. Drawing on Sen's (1981) framework I argue that in patriarchal structures men have accessed more entitlements on the basis of their 'maleness'. Women largely rely on endowments and are less likely to be able to cash in on the things to which they are formally entitled. In gender stratified societies, such as Bangladesh, even entitlements can be construed as endowments and the boundary between entitlement and endowment often becomes blurred.

As mentioned in previous chapters, in Bangladesh, establishing control over one's own resources on the part of women does not tend to be deemed gender appropriate behaviour. Studies have demonstrated that on many occasions women are required to relinquish the right over their own earnings in favour of male household heads (Kibria 1995; Custers 1997; Kabeer 1997 and 2000). Household responsibilities, another divisive arena of gendered power relations, are seldom negotiated between partners merely on the basis that women are involved in paid employment. Studies have documented less significant shifts in the domestic divisions of labour in response to women's massive entry into the labour market (Brines 1994). Both the developed and less developed countries bear stark resemblance in this regard; the differences, if there are any, are only in degrees not in kind (Ericksen et al. 1979; Huber and Spitze 1981; Hochschild 1989; Brannen and Moss 1991; VanEvery 1995; Baxter 2002; Beblo and Robledo 2008; Gwozdz and Sousa-Poza 2010).

### **Housework is still 'women's work'**

It had been estimated by many scholars that the increase in numbers of married women in paid work would lead to a parallel increase in the husbands' contribution in housework (Baxter 2002). However, this was not the case as most women continued to

perform the bulk of domestic chores due to the absence of any such increase in men's unpaid housework, especially in but not confined to developing or less developed countries (Crompton 1999; Chant 2000; Alméras 2000; Pearson 2000). Harrison (2000) recognises housework as the least flexible aspect of the divisions of labour. In Bangladesh men's and women's horizons are commonly divided by their roles in society, where men are entrusted with the responsibilities that take place outside the home, mainly in the economic realm, and women are responsible for tasks that take place inside the home. Though this division of responsibilities has loosened to some extent as a large number of women are sharing the breadwinner role and contributing a great deal to the household budget, there is still little evidence of change in the gendered allocation of housework which means women's paid employment serves to increase their overall work burden (Pearson 2000; Hochschild 1989). In contrast to Crompton (1999), who found that in households where women earn more, or at least as much as their male counterparts do, the domestic division of labour tends to be more flexible; in this study I found that the domestic division of labour continues to remain virtually unaffected and women still have to bear the full brunt of domestic responsibilities alongside paid work. In accordance with Lim (1997a) I also found that patriarchal ideologies and social structures tend to hinder potential transformations in hierarchical gender relations and this is particularly so in poorer households. Drawing on Pyke (1996) I found that unlike their upper-class counterparts, poor men's extremely limited economic resources rarely provide them the justification of not shouldering the housework and often lead them to rely on dominant patriarchal ideology to assert their masculinity. Noorjahan, who was the principal breadwinner of her family, illustrated the scenario:

*“My husband never helped me in domestic chores. When the children were young, it was more difficult for me to manage my paid employment alongside the household chores, but I never received any help from this man. Rather he always wants his things to be ready in front of him... he wants steaming hot rice on time no matter whether I am unwell or exhausted” (Noorjahan, 34, married, mother of 5).*

Olifa's story revealed that her husband was very demanding and never ready to alter the existing household divisions of labour. She managed to join the labour market only after reassuring him that the housework, children's well-being and his comforts would not be

neglected. He, although using all her earnings to manage the household expenditures, neither lessened the demand of extra care and attention nor tried to understand how she managed everything single-handedly. Olifa recounted his reply when she asked him to shoulder a little bit of housework, “if I need to do the household chores then why are you here?” This comment not only illustrates that men still believe that housework is primarily ‘women’s work’ but it also supports the contention that paid employment is only an extension of women’s already heavy work burden. Afia’s account provides a moving example of men’s extremely rigid mindset regarding domestic work:

*“My husband never helps me with housework; rather I need to pay extra attention to him. I had been unwell for several days and unable to leave the bed, but he was not kind enough to offer me a glass of water. During the illness, one day I was feeling terribly bad and felt like taking shower so I begged him to get me some water. He fetched me a small bucket of water, this is the only thing my husband did for me during our conjugal life” (Afia, 34, married for a 2<sup>nd</sup> time, mother of 6).*

Contrary to these stories, Muleda presented a picture of her household where her husband was willing to shoulder domestic work but it was unusual to Muleda to involve him in “her work”. However, of late she felt she would appreciate it if he offered “help”, yet she maintained that she would not ask him to do anything if he did not do it himself. This attitude of Muleda reflects that both men and women who subscribe to the patriarchal gender ideology tend to believe that women’s income earning role has nothing to do with their ‘main role’ in the domestic sphere. However, it appears from the comments of my female participants that paid employment and the parallel heavy load of domestic chores places an enormous strain on them. As such, most of them implicitly, if not explicitly, wanted their husbands to shoulder some of the family work to decrease their burden. Women did not seem to believe that their husbands should share more responsibilities once they are involved in full-time employment, believing that it would be unjust for husbands to do double shifts as wives do. Many participants, like Muleda, were heavily influenced by the socio-cultural and religious myths of male supremacy and did not overtly challenge men’s privileged position in the home. The predominance of women in the society who accept the sexual division of labour in principle limits the scope for others to bring shifts. The way women conform to their ‘wifely role’ obviously produces conditions that foster power differentials between men

and women. I would, nevertheless, say that women do possess the desire to receive husbands' input in housework. In most cases women do not bear the burden themselves *only* because they have learnt all through their lives that domestic chores are females' responsibility and it is their 'wifely' duty to serve their husbands. In fact, they refrain from asking for husbands' support in housework out of the fear that a man would feel angered and emasculated if he is being asked to do what he perceives are 'female jobs'. Given the persistence of the gender stratified nature of Bangladeshi society, it is not unlikely that he might resort to violence against his wife if she asks him to share domestic chores. Sajeda's account explained the situation clearly:

*"My husband never shared the housework and still now he does not do anything at home. My elder daughter, who is only 8, takes care of my younger daughter when I go to work. If I ask my husband to extend help, he gets enraged and says, "you slut, I have returned home after the whole day, now in which work should I help you?" I need to wash his clothes, bring him water for bathing and serve him freshly cooked food"* (Sajeda, 28, married, mother of 2).

Monzurul's account vividly described the patriarchal gender ideology of the society. He explained that his wife is required to do all the household chores and could not expect help from him since he believed he got married so that his wife could take care of him. Taking care involves the following tasks: preparing his favourite dishes when he visits home, washing his clothes, bringing him water from the neighbourhood pond or tube-well with a bucket for bathing or having a wash, massaging oil on his legs and so on, alongside taking care of the regular housework. Helping his wife in domestic chores and taking care of her seemed to be absurd to him. He also deemed that a woman does not have much to do as a homemaker and if a woman is not able to take care of her husband, children and housework, she is not only a failure as a wife but also unworthy to be called a woman. Roab, who was sharing the provider role with his wife, did not take on housework but neither did he claim extra attention to his personal needs. It seemed his dependence on his wife's income prevented him from asserting typical masculine privilege within the home:

*"I do not ask my wife to do my personal work, I do it myself. If I find her sleeping after getting back from work, I do not wake her up. I bring water from the tube-well to have a*

*wash and after freshening up, I reheat my food and eat” (Roab, 47, married to a beti jogali).*

Joynul’s wife also worked as a construction worker and was required to finish the housework after returning from work. Although Joynul, like Monzurul, believed she did not have many things to do at home, sometimes he, nevertheless, “helped” her when she struggled to manage by herself. This indicates that men are also slowly negotiating gender roles when women are entering the labour force and especially, when men are the prime financial beneficiaries. Similarly, Moinul shared housework with his wife during his visit back to their village home. Although his wife was not involved in paid employment, he wanted to ease her workload when he was around. He felt that sharing housework would strengthen their conjugal bond and convey the message that he cared for his wife, who lived in the village with their young children and fulfilled familial responsibilities in his absence. Moinul perceived doing housework would not tarnish his image as a ‘man’ as he usually cooked and cleaned for himself in Sylhet. Rather, he felt good about doing small things for his wife to make her happy and got some satisfaction out of fulfilling his responsibilities towards his wife and family.

Khason, on the other hand, although being immensely dependent on his construction worker wife for the maintenance of his personal and family expenses, never shared domestic chores with his wife. Instead he deliberately kept himself away from doing these jobs as he perceived them as “feminine”. As I argued in Chapter V, in the absence of other means of asserting and upholding his masculine identity, he opted not to perform “female jobs”, which gives him the feeling of being a ‘man’:

*“I do not do cooking, cleaning, washing etc. These are women’s work and women have been doing it for ages. This is the system. My father and uncles never did such work. They never cleaned their plates after eating. If I do it, and a friend or neighbour sees, (s)he will laugh at me and say, “after getting married you have become an effeminate man. Instead of getting these chores done by your wife, you are doing women’s work””*  
(Khason, 41, married to a beti jogali).

Another male worker, Raju, commented that he would “help” his wife in housework if needed. Rezan also reported being willing to share domestic chores with his wife but

often encountered sarcasm from his female extended family members. A similar experience was reiterated by Mizan who recounted that the likelihood of being ridiculed by female acquaintances effectively put him off helping with domestic work. It appears that the existing belief that ‘housework is women’s work’ is so deeply rooted in women’s consciousness that even when men are ready to negotiate the artificial boundary of men’s and women’s work, some women as well as men continue to police the status quo:

*“When I visit my family back home, I help my wife with housework. I especially help her during the season of paddy cutting. My female relatives e.g., my sisters-in-law and aunts laugh at me as I help my wife in her tasks. They say “you have come over home only for a few days, your wife should take special care and pay extra attention to you, but instead of being cared for by your wife, you are taking care of her”” (Rezan, 33, married to a housewife).*

A female construction worker, Amena, also held that it is not always the men who want to maintain the existing gender divisions of labour within the home, in fact, it is often women themselves who help perpetuate and maintain the hierarchical gender order. Amena’s mother lived with her and used to do household chores in her absence. Amena’s husband sometimes helped his mother-in-law, and women of their neighbourhood often ridiculed him for this. Amena’s husband, however, never paid any heed to such taunts as he believed it was important on his part to understand his wife’s plight and extend support in all possible ways.

A vast majority of participants however did subscribe to the patriarchal gender ideology. According to Crompton (1999) ‘normative attitudes’ internalised in the early stage of life are quite difficult to alter in adulthood. People, who grow up in households where domestic divisions of labour are inflexible and hierarchical, are less likely to practice more rational domestic divisions of labour in their later life. I found this to be the case, especially with male participants who continued to refer to their parents’ generation as an example of an ideal type of role-relations, without, however, acknowledging the fact that women, in the past, were relatively less burdened with the responsibility of earning an income outside the home. It appears from the comments of my participants that people’s perceptions have considerably greater impact on the

domestic divisions of labour than women's paid employment per se. A pattern has emerged here, with male participants who reported sharing housework with their wives or possessing the desire to do so, mostly were married to housewives; while female participants' husbands who were partially or fully dependent on wives' wages were surprisingly less inclined to share domestic chores. Here my observation finds resemblance with Hochschild (1989) and Pyke (1994 and 1996), who also observed that unemployed husbands do less housework than employed husbands. My participants' vignettes and my own observations, however, suggest that it would be very difficult to make straightforward correlations between men's age, income or any other specific attribute in relation to their performance of domestic labour. A few examples can be useful to understand this contention. Monzurul and Moinul both shared many similarities: for instance, both of them are in their late 30s, both are *rajmistris*, primary breadwinners of their households and their wives' were not engaged in paid employment; whilst Moinul (37) was keen to share chores with his wife, Monzurul (38) was reluctant to think about sharing housework. Nokhal (17) and Jamal (26), who were single and relatively younger, did find housework a 'womanly' thing. Joynul (54), a relatively older participant, on the other hand, shared some domestic responsibilities albeit out of sheer necessity. It seems by not participating in domestic work men seek to preserve their reputations as 'men', while women do not persuade men too much to do 'female jobs' in order to signify that they have a 'real man' as a husband. This also serves to guard against being restricted by their husbands from paid work when they know how critical their income is to the survival of their families.

### **'Working women' and wives in decision making: men's views**

Blumberg (1991) argues women's involvement in paid employment has a significant impact on their decision-making authority over the households' central resource allocation decisions. A similar assertion was made by Zaman (2001) in her study of female garment factory workers in Bangladesh. In my study I found that earning an income does not necessarily confer women greater decision-making ability. Men sometimes allow women to make decisions regarding the issues that they consider trivial or less important. Tiano (1994:221) notes that women engaged in paid employment are capable of using their agency 'within the parameters of their structural

and cultural constraints' and make decisions about their lives. However this was not necessarily the case for the participant female construction workers. Even though Khason was immensely dependent on his construction worker wife's wages, he never let her make independent decisions except allowing her to take birth control measures as they already had a desirable number of sons.

Studies conducted in rural Bangladesh in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century demonstrated that generally male guardians play the dominant role in arranging marriage for a girl (Jahan 1975; Chowdhury 2000). Kajol's statement reminds us that the scenario has not changed much:

*"I will not discuss my daughters' marriage with my wife. My brothers and other male guardians will make the decision because women do not possess the ability to judge what is good or bad" (Kajol, 41, married to a beti jogali).*

Monzurul, a *rajmistri*, determined which issues he and his wife discussed. He, however, believed that discussing their daughter's wedding with his wife is necessary as she is the one who, in his absence, runs the household in their village. Jalal explained that he never felt enthusiastic about discussing important issues with his wife as he believed women lack knowledge about the outside world, so he felt that it is meaningless to discuss important matters. Durud also shared a similar view to that of Jalal and added his wife always had to follow what he said. He also claimed that he never felt the necessity to consult with his wife about issues. A completely different perspective was presented by Roab, who believed from his own experience that women could make rational decisions. Roab's construction worker wife not only shared the breadwinning role with him but also arranged employment for him. In order to facilitate his access to an income she had borrowed money from a credit agency and bought him a rikshaw. When I spoke with her she was planning to buy another rikshaw to rent out to increase the family income. Roab explained:

*"Men tend to believe that only they can make sensible decisions. I always consult with my wife before making a decision. She always gives me good suggestions and makes me aware of my mistakes. I often borrow money from people and cannot plan how to repay*



*it, but my wife does it. If I did not consult with my wife and value her opinions, I would not be able to run the household smoothly” (Roab, 47, married to a beti jogali).*

Although Bazlu partially supported Roab’s account and perceived that men need to discuss important familial matters with their wives for the smooth functioning of conjugal relations, he, however, also maintained that men need to be in control of their households. Moinul’s comment also reinforces the patriarchally-engendered belief that women are not worthy of discussing all important matters, but the issues regarding children’s marriage may need to be discussed with the wife because it is she who always reminds him of the things to do about the children’s future. It seems that men’s immense dependence on wives for raising children enables women to participate in certain areas of decision making regarding children’s well-being. Raju, a relatively young man, reported he had discussions with his wife before making important decisions. These comments, indeed, may indicate a slow but positive transformation of rigid patriarchal thinking amongst younger generations of men.

### **Conjugal conflict**

In Bangladeshi society domestic violence is widespread and women continue to suffer from different forms of violence within their home. Researchers have estimated that as many as 87% of Bangladeshi women face behaviour in the home which may legally constitute domestic violence (The Daily Star 2014). It emerged from the narratives of my female participants that domestic violence is inextricably linked with conjugal conflicts as only a small number of arguments appeared to end before any sort of violence takes place. Pyke’s (1996) study reveals that the greater incidences of wife abuse are committed by poor, unemployed or underemployed husbands who are unable to fulfil their breadwinner role. Role reversal in the economic sphere is seen to be a slight on their masculine identity by many men who adhere to existing patriarchal gender role ideologies and this may lead them to react violently to their wives (Rubin 1983 cited in Min 2001:302). However, Salway et al. (2005) conducted a study in Bangladesh and found that women’s involvement in paid employment outside the home contributes to lessening domestic violence against wives perpetrated by husbands. In contrast to this finding, Rokeya’s comment reveals that women’s paid work is not

always likely to bring a significant change in conjugal relations. Husbands continue to feel that no matter what their wives contribute, they have the last say:

*“Conjugal conflicts are an integral part of the lives of people living in poverty. We often fight over issues associated with financial constraints [. . .] first we exchange words and gradually both of us get agitated. We start behaving aggressively and shouting at each other; which sometimes leads to violent reactions on the part of my husband, such as beating me up and hitting me with anything he can find to hand. I also retort and call him names” (Rokeya, 43, married, mother of 6).*

Muleda, Rehana, Piyara and Fuleza identified poverty as the main reason for their conjugal conflicts and they assumed, had they not been so poor, conflicts would have been less frequent. Fuleza illustrated her story:

*“My husband was an irregular earner and it is no wonder that in a poverty stricken family conjugal conflicts would be omnipresent. My husband used to get annoyed if I would say something. He used to initiate fights generally and after having heated conversations, he beat me up with whatever was available at arms length, including a broom and a fishing rod. There was not a single thing in our house with which he did not hit me” (Fuleza, 33, married, mother of 3).*

Both male and female participants commented that conjugal conflicts were nothing unusual and female participants held that wife battering was normal in their households. Kajol often used to beat his wife only to release his frustration and anger. However Roab, another male participant, instead of venting his frustration on wife, used to disappear from the house for a short while and reappeared only when his wife would come down. Perhaps, a little surprisingly, Roab behaved unlike many male participants and tried to avoid domestic conflicts. It seems his wife’s greater role in providing and managing the household finance afforded her some respect which not only reduces her chances of facing domestic violence but enhances her power in the domestic front.

Afia’s story demonstrates that conjugal conflict and resultant wife battering do not require specific cause; in fact, husbands can resort to violence over any issue or even without an issue. She remembered her first husband, although he was not nice in many

ways, never abused her physically; while her second husband often beat her up. Her husband's mother and first wife often tried to set him against Afia and he used to resort to violence without investigating the veracity of the allegation. Another participant, Rina, could not remember a single day without experiencing physical violence by her husband and was still bearing the scars he had caused. She endured brutal acts that he perpetrated for trivial reasons or for no reason at all. In order to avoid jeopardising her marriage, Sheba avoided everything that she thought might enrage her husband, nonetheless, she seldom managed to escape from conflictive situations. Olifa also described how domestic violence was a regular phenomenon in her life. Her husband would cruelly beat her for example if she was at work and not immediately available to execute his orders. Though Olifa's husband was aware of her paid employment and she always relinquished control over her income in favour of him, it was not enough for him to stop his violence against her. Sajeda, on the other hand, believed that before joining paid work she was more susceptible to marital violence. Though her husband had not stopped beating her altogether, it was, nevertheless, less frequent. Bilkiss also told me a similar story to that of Sajeda. Before joining the workforce, she routinely encountered the wrath of her husband for small issues or issues beyond her control; after joining the labour force, he behaved rather kindly towards his wage earner wife. Sometimes he even helped her with domestic chores. Morzina also elaborated how her abusive husband changed his behaviour upon her joining the labour market:

*“My husband used to beat me from the very beginning of our marriage. He never thought about me and the children. He lost everything on gambling. If I would say anything, he started screaming at me. He would say that he was not doing it with my father's money so I should not have problems with what he was doing. However, now he does not beat me up. Maybe he thinks that I am working hard for the family and I would be able to live without him” (Morzina, 32, married).*

### **Women's wages: source of power or cause of violence?**

It is often argued in development literature that women's entry into the labour force is one of the most powerful sources of their empowerment. Women's vital economic contribution to the household economy is deemed to enhance their ability to make

important familial decisions and grant them experience and self-reliance in the public domain (Pineda 2000; Min 2001). In the previous section we saw that women's paid employment sometimes enables them to circumvent domestic violence which was the most prevalent outcome of conjugal conflicts in their households. However, contrary to this observation and in line with Pearson (2000) and Atkinson et al. (2005) I found that in some cases women's capacity to earn an income exposes them to more violent situations in the home as men often seek to gain access to women's income. Mahmuda explained how her income earning ability made her husband a parasitic, greedy and unkind person. She described experiencing physical violence even before joining the workforce; taking on paid employment and earning a tangible income however has not improved her situation, rather worsened it further:

*“My husband used to beat me when I was not working outside, but, now he beats me more frequently than before. At present the conflict is solely associated with my ability to earn an income. The days I cannot find work or do not feel like going to work because of illness, I encounter domestic violence” (Mahmuda, 35, married, mother of 6).*

Quisumbing (2010) argues that in India, where giving and receiving dowry is a widely practiced custom, domestic violence can be used as a way to extract resources from wives or their families. I also found this to be the case. Hasna highlighted dowry demand, a patriarchally-engendered issue of conflict and subsequent violence:

*“When my husband gets angry he starts beating me and asking for money. He also hurls abuses and says, “why your brothers don't give me money? Why don't they take special care (jamai ador) of me?” I tell him, “leaving me behind you have taken a second wife so you cannot expect my brothers to support you anymore. You have now stepped on two boats so it is obvious that no one will rely on you”” (Hasna, 28, married, mother of 2 daughters).*

Rehena said she had a loving and caring husband (although her subsequent narrative does not support this assertion), nevertheless, she always remained anxious over whether she would manage to find work for herself the next day. In the absence of her husband's steady income, she became the principal provider of the household. If

sometimes she was unable to find work and buy food, her husband would become furious and start hurling abuse at her. Rehana felt at times her contribution to the family went completely unrecognised and her personal well-being was overlooked; she felt that she was not at all appreciated for the good things she did, rather only blamed for not being able to be a better provider. Rina's husband left Rina and her child, but continued to visit her occasionally just to snatch her hard earned income. If she denied him access to her money, she often faced physical and verbal abuse. It seems when men are unable to earn an income and start relying on their wives' earnings, some men then try to demonstrate masculine power in the form of violence (Mayoux 2001; Chant 2002; Vera-Sanso 2000; Bryceson 2000). I argue this particular behaviour suggests their sense of failure as men and to offset this they assert their masculinity through violence, especially exerting force on wives.

**“Good women do not retain control over their income”**

In Bangladesh poor women take up paid employment in specific social, cultural and domestic contexts. Some studies have found that surrendering income in favour of male authority is the dominant pattern (Kibria 1995; Kabeer 1997). In congruence with this observation Joynul proudly reported that his construction worker wife handed over her wages right after returning from work. Moinul, a *rajmistri*, believed a woman needs to relinquish control over her own salary in favour of her husband. In contrast to Pahl's (1995) assumption, comments made by male participants of this study reveal that men do not believe that women's earnings belong to them; instead they tend to consider that a woman's wages belong to her husband who is the head of the household. This was illustrated through the remark of Moinul, according to whom women who try to retain control over their income are not “good women”:

*“I know a woman who is a high official and earns much higher wages than her husband, nevertheless, she always surrenders all her earnings to her husband. I saw her asking for money from her husband for her everyday expenditures; she never keeps back her income. I really appreciate that” (Moinul, 37, rajmistri, married to a housewife).*

Sajeda, a female construction worker, is required to surrender her income to her mother-in-law. This finds resonance with Kandiyoti's (1988) claim, and the male participants' viewpoint, that in a classic patriarchal society a married woman's labour belongs to her husband and his family. Coomi used to surrender her wages to her husband. She even refrained from covertly retaining control over a portion of her income for her personal consumptions as she thought keeping money from her own earnings might send a signal to her husband that she had been maintaining a secret fund to cheat on him. Kabeer (1997) and Safa (1995) have similarly demonstrated that men keep back a higher share of their incomes for their personal use, but women often do not do the same. Coomi's account revealed that she not only relinquished her control over the fruits of her own labour but also abstained from questioning the allocation of the resources. Muleda became the primary breadwinner of her family in the absence of her husband's steady income. Muleda believed she was required to hand over her earnings to her husband as it would not "look nice" if she did not forgo her income in his favour. I observed, and Kabeer (1997 and 2000) similarly noted, that some women deliberately keep themselves away from establishing control over their own income; they think that men 'allow' them to work so they should comply with the prevailing norms and discharge the role of submissive and self-sacrificing wives by renouncing their claim on material resources. Men also seemed to be heavily influenced by the socio-cultural myths of women's selfless, altruistic behaviour and believed that women should have no, or restricted, concerns about their personal well-being. Consequently, when a woman does not strictly adhere to a perceived archetype of a passive and submissive wife, it can infuriate a man and lead him to think that his wife is not a 'good woman'. Noorjahan's story shows how men feel about their inseparable rights over wives' income:

*"If I spend money for my own consumptions, my husband would initiate a fight. In our work sardars often give us 10-20 taka less and we all know that, but who would make my husband understand? He would think that I have spent it on something or kept it with me and consequently, he starts screaming at me" (Noorjahan, 34, married, mother of 5).*

Olifa surrendered her earnings to her husband to make him happy, nevertheless, she felt that she had never been appreciated for that. Instead of being thankful, he took it for granted and if she tried to raise her voice and remind him about her contribution, he

used to threaten her saying that he would stop her from going to work from the next day. Since she knew that it would only lead to more scarcity and suffering for her children, she would keep quiet. In concurrence with VanEvery (1995) and Mayoux (2001), Rokeya's story reveals, though women earn the money, in most cases they need men's permission regarding the allocation of their own earnings, but the same is not applicable to men. Men's superior authority serves to restrict women's ability to allocate their own wages:

*“Since the beginning, I surrender my income to my husband. He spends the money on necessary things. I do not keep money for myself; I only spend on me when it is unavoidable. I even do not chew pan-supari or drink tea like other co-workers do [...] I have taken loans from credit agencies and am require to repay the instalments. Sometimes, after finishing work I directly go to the credit agency to pay my instalments. My husband does not want me to spend all my earnings on loan payments, which often resulted in a conjugal fight” (Rokeya, 43, married, mother of 6).*

Drawing on Sen (1981) I argue even when women are entitled to earn an income the majority of my married female participants perceived that they did not have the formal entitlement to work outside the home. Rather they had been given permission by their husbands to take paid employment and this could be taken away. Women's ability to cash in on their entitlement within the patriarchal family structure, in comparison to men, is more constrained. Men themselves also thought that they had given permission to their wives to work and they could withdraw this endowment anytime. This perception of both men and women not only serves to weaken women's bargaining ability within the household but leads them to maintain a subservient attitude.

Female participants of this study not only relinquished their income in favour of their husbands, some of them borrowed money from credit agencies to comply with their husbands' wishes. Micro credit has been viewed by many scholars as an avenue for women's empowerment. In this study I found that instead of being a source of empowerment, micro credit had been a source of conjugal conflict and domestic violence for Aklima, Minara, Coomi, Rokeya, Olifa, Rehena and many others. None of them used the money they borrowed, nevertheless they became responsible for the repayments. This situation finds resonance with what, drawing on Akhtar's (2000) study

of Bangladeshi women, Momsen (2010:213) termed ‘feminisation of indebtedness’. In this study I found that women’s contribution to the household economy is less likely to pose a threat to men’s privileged position. Rather, in accordance with Stamp’s (1985) argument I also noticed that women who earn a greater share of household income deliberately avoid asserting too much power. Women, instead, seek to offset the threat posed by their economic activities by accepting a more submissive position which serves to reaffirm male authority. Bilkiss’ tale is a clear example of continued male privilege in the home:

*“I never fight with my husband. Had my husband been not a nice person, had he been torturing me like other men do, had he been in a relationship with other women, perhaps in that case I would have kept my earnings in my hands. My husband is nice to me, so I surrender all my wages to him. He spends the money for the household and gives me 10-20 taka every morning so that I can buy some food in the workplace. If I cannot go to work, it is only my husband who would earn and feed me, hence it is imperative on my part to surrender my income in favour of him. Besides, when I give him the money, he becomes very happy. Thus, I do not try to establish control over my earnings” (Bilkiss, 27, married, mother of 2).*

A significant number of my married female participants had to relinquish their wages in favour of their husbands. Notwithstanding, participants’ comments and my own observations revealed that income earning ability, to some extent, awards women self-esteem and confidence that they not only can earn their own livelihood but also can contribute to the survival of their entire family. Men, whilst they do not appear to overtly acknowledge their wives contribution, nevertheless, in varying degrees, also can comprehend the qualitative change in their wives’ situation. I would say that women’s paid employment may not have as yet transformed power relations between husbands and wives, it has at least constituted the basis of a more equal power balance in the home.

#### **“So what if a woman is the principal breadwinner?”: the male perspective**

Fernandez-Kelly’s (1990) study of Hispanic women maintains that in a patriarchal social context where men are expected to be the breadwinners of the family, their failure



to fulfil such expectations may lead to a shift in the gender power relations within the family. Pineda's (2000) study conducted in Columbia also found that women who are the principal earners of the family tend to exercise greater power and authority within the home. She goes on to argue that women's experience of employment and increased mobility in the public sphere facilitates them to bring a shift in gendered power relations in poorer households. Some other studies hold that women's greater access to economic resources through income earning activities and men's concomitant declined earning ability often lead to marital conflict (Kibria 1993; Mahler 1995; Min 2001). Pyke's (1994) study conducted in the US, however, notes that a large number of women adhere to the existing gender role, hence, despite their tangible contributions to the household finances, they continue to believe that the economic sphere is a male space. As a result, women's paid employment or performing the provider role seldom appears to act as a means of balancing hierarchical marital power. Blumstein and Schwartz's (1983) study of the US couple also maintained that as long as either of the partners continues to uphold the view of a male breadwinner, the husband will remain powerful in marital relations irrespective of his ability as a provider. Although women's paid employment is believed to be one of the important avenues of achieving equality between the sexes, in reality the relationship is not that clear-cut. In fact, it is more complicated and contested and often intertwined with the cultural practices of a particular society (Crompton 1999). Volger and Pahl's (1994) study in the UK indicates that in low income households where men unequivocally control the finance, women are more likely to be constrained to exercise their power and face higher levels of deprivation. I found this to be the case in this study: men continue to maintain their privileged position even in the absence of any meaningful contribution, which also finds resonance with VanEvery (1995) who is of the opinion that men persistently hold greater power only because of the fact that they are 'men'; as Rokeya explained:

*“My husband is not at all thankful to me... I am the person who is running the family financially, but he does not acknowledge it. If I say something, he would say “you are feeding me, so what should I do? Should I dance with you on my shoulder? Why do you go to work? Did I ask you to go?” He neither values my contributions nor the sacrifices, rather he shouts at me all the time” (Rokeya, 43, married, mother of 6).*

A vast majority of married female participants reiterated Rokeya's feeling that they also had never been appreciated by their husbands for discharging the responsibility as main providers. Instead, they encountered hostile behaviours on the part of husbands. Kanchon illustrated:

*“My husband does not value my contribution in running the household. I can never tell him that he is completely dependent on my earnings. I have been bearing the expenses of the family by working in construction, and instead of being thankful to me, he asks me, “why do you go to work? Since you work outside, do you think that you have become the husband in this relationship (tui amake biye korechish)? Do you think you have become a man?”” (Kanchon, 36, married for a 2<sup>nd</sup> time, mother of a son).*

Pahl (1995) noted that as principal breadwinners men and women tend to enjoy dissimilar types and levels of power and privilege in the family. It appears from both male and female participants' comments that women's paid employment and contributions to the household economy do not reduce men's authority over women's lives. Furthermore, men in most cases continue to have the last say in the household:

*“Although my husband uses my earnings for family expenditures, he neither respects me nor respects my work. If I cannot get back home before him, he gets furious. He never ever understands that it is not in my control. If my employer does not allow me to go, how can I go? Sometimes sardars keep us waiting for a long time to pay our wages. I can come back home without taking my money but what about my whole day's labour? My husband often says you do not need to go to work but that's it. He says that to establish his dominance over me, he does not mean that if I do not go to work, he would feed us” (Olifa, 24, married, mother of 4).*

Female participants' accounts reveal that men continue to benefit from their patriarchal dividend even when they are fully or partially depend on women for financial support (Kabeer 2007). In concurrence with Lim's (1997a) finding, male participants, however, feel that women with an independent income do not act as subservient as they do without an income. Men categorically blamed women's paid employment and subsequent access to an independent income for creating marital discord. Khason elucidated:

*“If a woman earns, she behaves differently. However, a good woman never raises her voice against her husband no matter whether she earns or not. You have to remember a woman’s heaven lies under the feet of her husband. If my wife teases me only because she earns a living, it is worse than anything. Many women do it, which leads to conjugal conflicts. My wife knows I cannot earn enough that’s why I have allowed her to join the workforce. There is no use showing self-importance on her part” (Khason, 41, married to a beti jogali).*

The majority of male construction workers believed women must not claim their share in the household or confront male authority; rather they need to remain submissive and devoted to them. No matter whether a woman earns an income or not, she must not raise her voice in front of her husband or challenge any of his decisions. They tend to believe that if a woman tries to consolidate her power in the home on the basis of the fact that she earns for the family, it is her “grave mistake”. Some of the male participants assumed that women who are more intelligent are less likely to challenge male authority in the home even when they are the principal earners of the family. Liton, a male participant, maintained “intelligent women would know that earning an income does not provide her the licence to undermine her husband”. Bazlu also held a similar view and commented that “good women do not raise their voice even if they earn a huge amount of money, whilst ill-mannered women keep taunting their husbands for a small monetary contribution to the household”. Nokhal, the youngest of all participants, did not want his future wife to be economically independent as he felt her command over cash income might give her a greater voice to defy his authority:

*“I would want my wife to stay at home and take care of my parents. I would not want her to be nosy and express opinions about everything. If my wife listens to my mother and does what I want, I will also love her” (Nokhal, 17, single).*

Irrespective of age and marital status, the majority of my male participants perceived that women’s employment serves to weaken patriarchal power in marital relations. Female participants who were the main providers for their households, did not tend to raise their voice in the home as speaking out was not going to help them, rather it could

expose them to marital violence. Rokeya, for example, did raise her voice and express dissatisfaction but it led to violence as she explains:

*“A couple of days back I was angry and told my husband that being a woman I am working hard to raise our children and he is just roaming around freely without thinking about the family and the future of our children. This statement made him so annoyed that he did not hesitate to hit me with a piece of wood. Still I am bearing the bruises and having pain in my right hand” (Rokeya, 43, married, mother of 6).*

The accounts of the participants of this study strengthen Francis (2002) and Mayoux’ (2001) assertion that taking on a breadwinning role does not necessarily facilitate women to escape male authority in the home. Rather women’s voices are muted in the name of socially prescribed ‘good’ behaviour and cultural practice. I have argued throughout the thesis that despite their huge contribution to the family economy women do not claim a privileged position because they believe, along conventional lines, that husbands should be the breadwinners while wives stay at home and serve their husbands and other family members. Processes of socialisation and dominant local gender discourses shape women’s thought patterns in a way that they tend to feel that they are contravening the divine law by entering the male sphere. In line with Lim (1997a) I also contend that in Bangladeshi society the provider role is exclusively believed to be male. The wives, whose husbands are unable to emerge as successful breadwinners for their family, therefore, accept husbands’ dominance in order to heal their (husbands’) wound of feeling emasculated.

### **Equality does not begin at home**

Studies conducted in Bangladesh revealed that women’s entry into the labour market does not necessarily allow them to negotiate housework with their husbands (Kabeer 1997; Choudhury 2010). In most cases, they ended up doing double shifts both in the home and workplace. Husbands not only appear to be reluctant to share domestic chores with their wives, but oblige their wives to pay them extra attention:

*“My wife pays extra attention to me. She massages oil into my legs and presses them after returning from work. We do not fight, rather we do things together. I do not force her to take extra care of me; whatever she does, it is spontaneous. If sometimes she does not massage my legs, I do not make her do it. I let her take rest [...] if she is unwell, I do not take care of her. It is not my task. Why should I pay extra care to her? We have children; they can take care of her if needed” (Joynul, 54, beta jogali and married to a beti jogali).*

Alongside their paid work and unpaid domestic work, women need to take special care of their husbands. Men, nonetheless, are less likely to be burdened with such expectations of taking care of their wives even when they really need it. Mahmuda recounted her husband never paid attention when she was unwell. He did not take any initiative to ensure her medical treatment. Even when she was confined in the hospital and was in a critical condition he did not offer financial support or express sympathy. He instead made adverse comments, one of which was *“what can I do if she is dying? Let her die”*. Afia’s account also reveals to what extent men can be inconsiderate regarding their wives’ genuine needs:

*“The day I gave birth to my 3<sup>rd</sup> child with my second husband, I requested him to stay at home with me since I was feeling extremely bad. He turned me down flatly and went to attend a marriage ceremony. A woman of my neighbourhood helped me and saved me and my child. My husband did not even care about my life, but he wants me to pay extra attention to him” (Afia, 34, married for a 2<sup>nd</sup> time, mother of 6).*

Contrary to the assumption that men’s financial inability to perform their role as providers influences their sense of masculinity and paves the way to a reconfiguration of ‘traditional masculine identities and behaviour’ (Pineda 2000:77), men, in my study, appear to believe that wives need to be more altruistic and obedient to husbands, regardless of (or in some cases perhaps exacerbated by men’s attitudes towards) their contribution to the household. In Khason’s words:

*“Wives should understand their husbands’ pain and abide by their [husbands’] desire. If a wife does not do so, the family will not function properly. A wife cannot join the workforce without her husband’s permission. My wife also seeks my permission before*

*going out for work. Government has not said that women can disrespect their husbands only because they earn money. Women should not think that they have become equal to their husbands by earning an income” (Khason, 41, married to a beti jogali).*

Male participants of this study mostly supported Khason’s view and added that given women’s weak fallback position in society, they need to be more docile and compromising. This clearly reflects that women’s greater contribution to the household budget does not necessarily erode husbands’ patriarchal dividend, and society’s perceptions regarding gender roles also seem to remain quite untouched. Most men continue to believe a woman has to tolerate her husband’s anger if she wants to maintain the conjugal bond. They tend to believe that breaking the marital tie is less likely to bring disgrace for a man but the same is not true for a woman. Kajol from his own experience claimed that even the parents of a woman would not take the side of their daughter. If the man is wrong, still no one would force him to find the middle ground. Rather everyone would suggest the woman should abide by her husband’s desire.

The constitution of Bangladesh guaranteed equal rights to both men and women in all spheres of life. However, a huge difference still unsurprisingly exists between the actual practice and what is proclaimed in the constitution. Peoples’ lives, by and large, are governed by the existing social and religious practices rather than the law of the land; and this is particularly true for the people living in poverty. A great majority of my male and female participants held that ‘a wife’s heaven lies under the feet of her husband’, although there is no such assertion made in the Quran or hadith. As I stated previously, social norms and cultural practices are sometimes presented as religious edicts, and may come to be attributed without question to the Quran and/or hadith. Such myths are extraordinarily pervasive and have been used routinely to subordinate women. The following comment made by Baazlu regarding men and women’s equal rights is a clear example of this claim:

*“Husband and wife cannot be equal in terms of rights in different realms. This is a natural difference and trying to surmount this disparity is also tantamount to the contravention of the divine law. We take care of our parents at their old age, then how come a daughter can get equal rights over the patrimony. Had there been no innate*

*difference between men and women, God would not have created men and women. He would have created only men” (Bazlu, 41, rajmistri, married to a housewife).*

Like Bazlu, many other male participants were also against the idea of equal rights and were of the opinion that equal rights of men and women are a contravention of the “divine natural law”. Raju, relatively young and recently wed, on the contrary, held the opinion that women should have more rights in general and in conjugal relations in particular as they are more vulnerable to different sorts of deprivation and deception in their marital home. Durud was not in favour of equal rights in all aspects of life per se, he, nonetheless, supported women’s equal rights in patrimony as he believed if his wife or sister inherited property they would help him financially in times of crisis and he would not have much trouble accessing their resources. Liton, however, offered a more pessimistic view regarding equal rights of men and women. He believed women in Bangladesh only have equal rights in terms of casting votes, and was convinced that even in the remote future women would not get equal rights in all aspects of life.

To conclude, Walby (1986) extends her theory of patriarchy in the Western context and is of the opinion that a great number of contemporary families are no longer patriarchal in a rigid sense. As I demonstrated in Chapter VI, different aspects of Walby’s theory of patriarchy are useful to explain various patriarchal practices that are existent in Bangladesh; nevertheless, in contrast to Walby, I contend that in Bangladeshi society patriarchy continues to be persuasive both in the home and the workplace. Despite the massive incorporation of women into the labour market, the erosion of men’s role as primary breadwinners, and women’s subsequent reduced dependence on men for economic protection, patriarchal control in the home has diminished only marginally. Women are still seen to shoulder the main responsibilities of the household in addition to their increasingly important role as providers, while husbands appear to stick to the patriarchal authority both in terms of sharing housework and embracing more egalitarian ideologies.

In line with Safa (1995) I argue that in Bangladeshi society the distinction between the private and public sphere is still very sharp which continues to value the custom of separate spheres for men and women. Although a large number of men are unable to discharge their responsibilities as providers, I found both men and women continue to

try and keep intact the culturally accepted structure of male headship and this helps men perpetuate their control in the home. Women's and men's perceptions regarding gendered attribution of tasks are so deeply embedded that the norms of patriarchal control have altered only slightly even in a context in which women are the sole providers. I found that in most families, men still control the cash flow even though the money was not earned by them. I argue that income under male control not only obscures the actual contribution of women but also enables men (and women) to conceal men's failure to meet the cultural expectations. I also contend that women's greater economic contribution and the kind of economic role reversal within the family puts psychological pressure on men and negatively impacts on their self-esteem. Men are aware that their wives are now better equipped, both socially and economically, to live independently which ironically in many cases was seen to further lead them to enforce patriarchal control in the home rigidly. In his cooperative-conflicts model Sen (1990) argues the person who gives preference to his/her family's well-being over personal well-being is more likely to be in a less favourable position vis-à-vis household bargaining. In this study I found that in most cases it is the women's deliberate decision to attach a higher value to their family's, especially children's, well-being. I argue that female construction workers are aware of gender inequality, husbands' dominance and unequal domestic power in the home but they do not appear to overtly challenge it partly because of their strong attachment to patriarchal cultural practices and partly because of the 'perceived interest response' that performing all familial responsibilities, including earning a living for the family, will earn them the reputation of 'good women' among the extended family members and acquaintances. This is not to say they do not challenge patriarchy in a meaningful way; I will discuss this further in Chapter VIII. Furthermore, the main purpose of the participant women to enter the labour market was to support the family, their paid employment was not directed by the quest for emancipation or economic independence; in fact, it was their dire economic need that pressed them to take on paid employment. I contest that these circumstances contribute to women's lesser inclination to question male authority in the home. Challenging male authority overtly and robustly in a highly patriarchal context also means disrupting the conjugal relationship, which women rarely want. Women's weak fallback position resulting from the normative expectations of society, lack of social security, and the stigma attached to divorce, pushed them not to destabilise the marital bond even when it is abusive and/or exploitative.



In sum, female construction workers' experience within the family is characterised by a complex and contradictory conjunction of sympathy and acceptance from some, violence and exploitation from others, and slightly changing attitudes over time among some who were initially either resistant or indifferent. However, drawing on Blumberg (1991) I would say that due to structural male power across wider society, female construction workers have been, as yet at least, less successful in translating their contribution at the micro level into greater equality for themselves. However it remains to be seen how this may play out into the future.

## **Chapter VIII: Women in construction: contesting agency and social transformation**

In this chapter I analyse women's perceptions of themselves concurrently as major financial contributors to their households and workers in the construction sector, and their struggle as 'working women' both in the workplace and their respective households. I argue that women become more confident, aware of their self-worth, more mobile, and learn new social skills because of their participation in the labour market. Besides these positive impacts, paid employment has negatively affected them in many ways which I discussed in previous chapters. Here I discuss how working in a heavily male dominated field has portrayed a negative image of female construction workers in society, even among their husbands, which places additional pressure on them to conform to existing patriarchal social norms and uphold their image of 'good women'. I argue this often hinders women's ability to act as active agents in society. Here I use Kabeer's (1999:438) definition of agency and Giddens' (1984:377) definition of structure. 'Agency is about more than observable action; it also encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity, their sense of agency, or 'the power within'' (Kabeer 1999:438), while structures are the 'rules and resources, recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems' (Giddens 1984:377).

The World Development Report (2012) observed a rapid growth of the female labour force in many developing countries, including Bangladesh. As noted in previous chapters, women in Bangladesh are historically absorbed in poorly paid and lower status jobs which are least secure in all respects. Nevertheless, access to an independent income has brought women outside the home and confers them greater self-esteem, sense of self-worth, and greater decision making power, while it simultaneously leads them to face sexual harassment, gender based discrimination in the workplace and social restrictions from the wider society for contravening the norms of *purdah*. This is especially the case for the women who are working in heavily male dominated spheres (Kibria 1995; Kabeer 1997 and 2000; Amin et al. 1997; Zaman 2001; Rahman 2010). Under these circumstances, how do female construction workers view themselves? How do their family members and wider society perceive them as construction workers? How

does the interplay of structural and individual factors shape women's agency and their different work related strategies?

### **Migration, new establishment and life in urban areas**

A few decades ago internal migration in Bangladesh was predominantly a male phenomenon and the reasons behind migration were predominantly related to men's economic situation. Female migration to urban areas, conversely, was in most cases persuaded by marriage (Afsar 2003). However, as I mentioned in previous chapters, when in the 1980s the garment industries in Bangladesh began to flourish, large numbers of women migrated from rural areas to Dhaka in order to pursue employment in the garment sector. Studies demonstrate that the proliferation of women factory workers led to historically unprecedented levels of women in the public realm in Bangladesh (Kabeer 2000). Women's entry into the factory jobs not only amplified their presence in the public sphere but also increased society's acceptance of women's paid employment and paved the way for other women to migrate to urban centres to take up waged work and establish new forms of living arrangements (Kabeer 1997). Other unconventional areas of employment which had previously been inaccessible to women became more accessible as a consequence of the pre-dominance of women in factory work, thereby further expanding the scope of work available to women. Whereas, prior to the availability of factory work, poor women seeking paid employment outside the home were largely limited to the role of domestic help in urban households (Asian Development Bank 2001).

Construction is one such area of employment which was virtually closed to women until the 1980s. As mentioned in Chapter IV, the few women who worked as construction workers in government run development projects in the late 1970s and early 1980s faced severe criticism and stigmatisation from their kin and wider society (Kabeer 1994). However, the situation is changing as more and more women are taking up paid employment outside the home to earn a livelihood for themselves and their family. This changing scenario has boosted women's confidence to make independent decisions about their lives. Razia, a female participant, explained her situation regarding when she had decided to walk out on her husband. Her parents had died by then and she did not

have any siblings; though her extended family members were always kind to her, she was not interested in returning to them after leaving her husband. Razia perceived that her freedom and self-esteem would suffer if she became dependent on them. She wanted to earn her own living by working hard, but again thought that she might face additional restrictions on her mobility and face barriers if she desired to live an independent life in her own social environment. Thus, in order to maintain her self-respect and autonomy she decided to migrate to Sylhet without a male guardian:

*“I had visited Sylhet a few times with my father and husband as both of them worked in Sylhet before. When I had left my husband, I travelled to Sylhet. I did not want to live in my own village as it was suffocating at that moment to be surrounded by familiar faces. I knew some people here in Sylhet so came here, stayed with them for a few days and then found my own way” (Razia, 27, separated from husband).*

She started living in Sylhet and managed to become engaged in construction work through the people she already knew there. She told me that she visited her village home occasionally but did not feel like going back there permanently in the near future. Rather she was happy with her relatively liberated life in Sylhet. A similar situation was depicted by Fuleza, who had been married to an abusive man. He neither cared for Fuleza’s well-being nor for the children, which was the root cause of conjugal conflicts in their household. One day a familiar conflict situation arose, Fuleza’s husband beat her up and ultimately asked her to leave his home. She travelled to Sylhet with the help of a male cousin without thinking about relying on someone else for her survival or begging her husband to take her back home.

*“My husband had kicked me out from his house. I did not look back. I travelled to Sylhet along with my 3 young children and started living here” (Fuleza, 33, mother of 3, married for a 2<sup>nd</sup> time).*

Although travelling to a city and establishing a new living arrangement on her own was a completely new experience for her, she told me that the stories of other women of her village, who had already migrated to cities, inspired her. Her cousin’s assurance of standing by her in times of crisis also helped her to take such a bold step. Another female participant, Shaheda, had the exposure of working outside even before she got

married. After getting married she went to live with her husband in his village home, but within a few months she realised that her husband did not have a steady income. Furthermore, he was unable to do physically demanding work due to illness. In their village home Shaheda could not join the labour force fearing social sanctions and loss of status, so poverty worsened for her family. She spent a few more months in poverty before deciding to migrate in order to fight against poverty and secure a better future for her only child. Her sister was also a construction worker in Sylhet and living with her husband and children. Shaheda contacted her sister and migrated to Sylhet with her child, leaving her husband in their village home. Shaheda's husband visited them occasionally but he did not permanently move with them as he was unwilling to leave his village home. Although she was struggling at the beginning, she did not want to be dependent on her sister's family. Shaheda told me that her sister and her family had been very supportive and wanted her to live with them, she, nevertheless, preferred to be on her own even in the absence of her husband, which obviously reflects her sense of self-esteem and the ability to define her own goals and act upon them:

*“My sister lives in Sylhet with her family. I go to work with my sister and or her son, but I do not live with them. I have rented my own place near my sister's house. I go to my sister's house often and she as well visits me several times a day to make sure that I am safe” (Shaheda, 25, married, mother of a daughter, migrated leaving husband back in village home).*

Studies conducted on garment factory workers in Bangladesh reveal that women's presence in the labour force brings some important shifts both in individual woman's lives and in wider social structures (Kibria 1995; Kabeer 1997; Salway et al. 2005; Rahman 2010). I also found this to be the case for female construction workers. Many of my participants told me that they dared to take these steps because they saw other women achieve success in this way, which inspired them to opt for this path. Migration to an urban setting not only involves the physical infrastructure. The way my female participants migrated, found shelter and set down roots in Sylhet concerns more than the materiality of infrastructure. Here the physical bodies of people were more important in realising this possibility of migration. There were ideological, social and religious restrictions to overcome. Some of the married participants left their husbands in their village homes, others convinced husbands to migrate who were initially not willing to

do so, whilst a group of women had left their abusive marriages and migrated with the intention of joining the labour market. This transformation in the thought patterns of women about coming out of their houses, migrating to a new social environment, taking up unconventional forms of paid employment and making new living arrangements obviously reflects their agency and personhood.

However, I argue that it is the 'embodied infrastructure' (Clisby and Holdsworth 2014:10) that renders possible the option of migration, without this it might not be conceived of as a possibility by most women and men. Here I wish to extend the notion of infrastructure directly to people's bodies. Embodiment refers to how one experiences one's own body and its capacity for doing 'this and that' (Longo et al. 2008), and infrastructure concerns fundamental physical structures such as transport, roads, buildings, power supplies and so on. Clisby and Holdsworth (2014:10) argue that 'women and women's services act as forms of *embodied infrastructure*. By this we refer to the ways that women's bodies and material actions themselves become the vehicles, the catalysts, the embodied infrastructure, facilitating access to services and enabling change and support through women's networks. This infrastructure is created through a range of encounters, from those women who act as mentors to other women within their working lives, to the services and formal and informal networks women have established that serve to provide a framework, an infrastructure of support for women'. Clisby and Holdsworth are not suggesting that these embodied infrastructures are *not* also forms of social network. Rather, they are emphasising that within these social, economic and spatial networks, women's active physical presence, their bodies, become a critical dimension in the creation and maintenance of these networks. They are also extending the understanding and use of the term 'infrastructure' to move beyond the purely material. Materiality of infrastructure is very important in migration but for the majority of Bangladeshi women only having this material infrastructure is not sufficient as a facilitating factor of migration. As we have seen in chapter IV, women use other people, especially other women, as a means of movement. These pioneering women set the trend of migration, directly or indirectly encourage others to migrate, and facilitate their migration in every possible way, such as bearing the expenses of migration and extending other necessary help and tips, initially providing them with food and shelter in the place of destination, helping them to find jobs and settle down in a new social setting. In this way the people who facilitate both the

process of migration and of finding roots in the urban settings become the infrastructure, i.e., embodied infrastructure. I would say it is not only the material support they provide that is valuable; rather these facilitators' physical presence and manoeuvring capability act as stimulants for the new migrants to overcome the social, religious and ideological predicaments. Migrating to urban areas without male guardians, establishing new living arrangements and engagement in heavily male dominated construction work become possible for most women predominantly because of this. The very presence of women's bodies in this whole process paves the way for other women. Cleaver (2007) extends the notion of embodiment as one of the enabling factors in understanding agency in the management of resources. She is of the opinion that one's physical states have an impact on the agency one exercises. In line with Cleaver I also contend that embodiment is an enabling factor and the embodied infrastructure of people who facilitate migration in the context of Bangladeshi construction sector acts as a catalyst for social transformations in significant ways.

### **Work, agency and everyday struggle**

Unlike the formal employment sector of Bangladesh, the informal employment sector largely evades legal scrutiny and regulation. Eighty five percent (85%) of paid women workers are employed in the informal employment sector thus those women receive scant legal protection and endowment (BBS 2009; Kabeer 2008). Despite the government's initiative to involve them in the Civil Service, a great majority of women continue to be engaged in the informal sector as most of them are constrained by formal education and other qualifications needed to take up formal sector jobs. Whilst women are not theoretically entrusted with the responsibility of providing for their families, widespread poverty practically requires many of them to earn a living for themselves and their family (Feldman 2001). As mentioned earlier, until the 1980s women's employment was limited to certain sectors, and working as domestic help in households was the dominant form of employment opportunity available to a large group of women. At present opportunities for women's employment in different sectors have opened up, however, these are still inadequate to meet the increasing demand of women to sell their labour power (Dannecker 2002; Mahmud 2003). As such women face tough competition in the labour market and sometimes try to manipulate the situation in their

favour. My participant female construction workers told me that they employ diverse strategies to attract the recruiters to secure jobs every morning.

Rahman (2010) mentioned in his study of female factory workers in Bangladesh, and I also observed, that female workers seek to establish good relations with male co-workers by using gender-related kinship terminology, such as *bhai* (older brother), *mama* (mother's brother) or *chacha* (father's brother). This is a common strategy used by women to establish verbal kin relations with their male co-workers, through which they simultaneously try to ensure cooperation and shun any possibility of sexual harassment in the workplace. One of my female participants, Ambia, told me that she even did not call male co-workers uncle, rather she called them *baba* (father) to avoid sexual advances and humbly sought co-workers' support in the workplace so that she could raise her children by earning an income. Another participant, Rokeya, said women who had worked in construction for years were familiar to contractors and *sardars*, so they highlight their previous experience and virtue of hard work to secure new job contracts. Studies conducted on garment factory workers show that docility of workers is often considered to be an important virtue by the recruiters or employers (Paul-Majumder and Begum 2000; Kabeer 2000 and 2004). The situation in construction is by no means exceptional. Female construction workers believe that being compliant can enhance their chance of being recruited. As such, most of them tend not to speak back if the *sardars* or *rajmistris* are rude, rather they speak softly to them to express their acquiescence. In this way they seek to boost their claim in the process of recruitment.

However, Morzina, a female construction worker, explained that everyone did not necessarily follow these strategies to be hired by the recruiters. She alleged that some of her female co-workers tried to be very friendly to recruiters to get jobs; they were so "cunning" that if they found a recruiter alone, they would tell him that he looked like their *dulabhai* (elder sister's husband). In Bangladeshi society a *dulabhai's* relation with his wife's younger sister is very relaxed. It is not to say that the relationship is sexual, rather it can be based on some sort of romantic frisson, which generally both parties enjoy, and society also seems to take it frivolously. Given this, Morzina perceived women deliberately give men the chance to be mischievous by calling them *dulabhai*; while in return they secure the job contract. Minara was of the similar opinion and



elaborated how some women secure jobs every day by establishing friendship with recruiters:

*“When the recruiters come to the point to hire workers, some of the female workers try to establish friendship with them. They ask the recruiters to buy them tea or pan-supari, and then again they say “OK, if do not want to buy for me, let me buy you a tea or tobacco”. Recruiters get the message that if they recruit these women, they can make sexual advances without much difficulty, thus they recruit them and leave quietly” (Minara, 28, married, mother of 4).*

Like Morzina and Minara, the majority of my participants maintained that a group of women co-workers use their ‘sexual capital’ as a form of slightly sexualised banter to deal with the recruiters and manage to secure jobs on a regular basis. Sexual capital is contingent. To extend this notion I use Michael’s (2004:645) definition of sexual capital, who describes it as a person’s sexual ‘skills and capabilities some of which are quintessential endowments’ while others are produced and transformed through ‘personal strategies, efforts and experiences’. Among my participants the most notable sexual resources were age, whiteness of skin, visible good health, complying with the norms of physical attractiveness and so on. Sexual capital is the property of individual people, and whilst some people choose to deploy their sexual capital, others do not. Shah (2006) in her study of brick kiln workers in India also found that using sexual means and nurturing passionate relationships are not uncommon in the kilns as young people often migrate to these kilns without family members and kin. Shah also reveals that in kilns romantic relationships are taken with relative ease both by men and women; hence on many occasions married couple try not to find employment in the same kiln to avoid conjugal conflicts and resentment. I argue that in the construction sector women are using their sexual capital as rational agents but within a very constrained gender regime. I observed and my participant Hasna noted, women who pretended to be friendly with recruiters and claimed to have a prior working relationship with the same recruiters, were often prioritised in the process of recruitment. Although recruiters seemed to understand that women were cooking up stories and indulging in friendliness only to get recruited, they would also give the impression that they believed it to be real.

*“As soon as the recruiters come to the congregating points, some women workers go close to them and tell them, “please hire me, I worked with you before. Oh, how come you can’t remember me?” They (women) hold the hands of the recruiters and try to convince them. Men also get convinced as they know these women are easygoing” (Hasna, 28, married, mother of 2 daughters).*

Some of my participants appeared to believe that they often ask the recruiters clear-cut questions about their roles and responsibilities on construction sites which potentially puts many of the recruiters off. Swapna told me that on many occasions she refrained from going to work as the only female worker, she always wanted to be accompanied by at least one female worker or a group of male workers, which further restricted her possibility of being recruited. She explained that women workers who readily agree to work even without enquiring about the nature of work, wages, and co-workers, are often prioritised by the recruiters as they are deemed to be more acquiescent.

As mentioned in Chapter VI, besides perceived docility, workers in many jobs are recruited on the basis of their attractiveness (Guifre and Williams 2005). I argue that this tendency is even greater in patriarchal social contexts where women are less visible in male dominated spheres. Mahmuda, a female construction worker, articulated how women’s physical appearance and charm help them to find jobs:

*“Some women come to the meeting points with nice hair and wearing clean nice clothes and sandals; whilst we wear filthy old clothes. We do not wear our good clothes thinking that soil and cement would cause damage. They wear nice clothes and shoes and we wear only 2 sets of clothes alternatively, throughout the year. They also speak to the recruiters having a smile on their faces and chat like a friend standing in a close proximity...they find work on a regular basis. These women do not need the essential instruments such as, axe and basket to go to work. They also do not need to carry their lunch boxes as they get food for free in the workplace” (Mahmuda, 35, married, mother of 6).*

It emerged from my participants’ narratives that some women take advantage of their beauty and youth to attract the recruiters and once the job is secured they take more advantages in terms of doing less arduous tasks, working in a more relaxed way,

receiving food, beverage and tobacco as treats from the recruiters by establishing special friendships with them. Jalal, a male construction worker, elaborated women use their sexual agency not only to secure jobs but also to reap the maximum benefits from the recruiters:

*“Some of the women are very clever; they somehow manage the rajmistris, sardars or contractors and spend the whole day without producing a tangible amount of work. These women though they do not work hard, nobody rebukes them and they even receive treats from the influential male co-workers” (Jalal, 24, married to a housewife).*

Dannecker (2002), in her study of Bangladeshi factory workers, was of the opinion that women are not passive recipients of sexual harassment in the workplace. Rather many of them actively use their sexual agency to advance their own interests. Such behaviour on the part of women, however, earns them disgrace as socio-cultural norms tend to be particularly repressive in the context of female sexuality (Kabeer 2000). The comments of my female participants find resonance with these observations. Conformity to the desires of the recruiters is the key to securing jobs regularly in construction. My participants maintained that women who are compromising and relatively easygoing are making it difficult for others to survive in this sector. They noted, by complying with the desires of recruiters, *sardars* or male co-workers, some women convey the wrong message that all female construction workers are sexually “available”. Female construction workers join this sector due to extreme poverty and they are very much in need of money as a great majority of them need to earn a living for themselves and their entire family. Some of them, therefore, try to secure work by employing whatever strategy they can. Although their desperate efforts leave many of their female co-workers unhappy and critical of their actions and held them responsible for being “provocative”, I contend that these women have little or no, or lack, social, cultural and economic capital, but some of them (depending on youth) have a certain amount of sexual capital to draw on so are using this as one of the few resources they do have. I am not suggesting that it is a desirable option for the majority of women, I am saying in these particular circumstances it is a rational choice to make in the light of lack other sources of capital on which they can draw.

### **Sexual harassment, agency, power and resistance**

Although a great majority of people in Bangladesh are living in poverty, women's entry into the labour force is, nevertheless, a relatively new phenomenon. Whilst women's labour force participation has grown significantly in the last few decades, more recent statistics nevertheless show that only 16.2 million Bangladeshi women are engaged in paid employment, compared with 37.9 million men (BBS 2011). As such, the sex ratio in the workplace is highly skewed. Studies have demonstrated that in societies where men are not accustomed to seeing women in the public sphere and the sex ratio is skewed in the workplace, men often believe that women who are working in the public sphere are sexually available (e.g. Gruber 1998; Momsen 1993; Gutek and Morasch 1982; Gutek 1985). Although these studies were conducted decades ago, we still find this observation relevant in the construction sector since all my female participants noted sexual harassment as an integral part of their workplace experience. As I mentioned also in Chapter VI, women remain apprehensive all the time that they may face sexual harassment of any form, including rape. The threat of harassment comes from different groups of people, such as contractors, *sardars*, *rajmistris*, male co-workers and individual recruiters and so on. I observed that on construction sites women were not viewed simply as workers, rather they were seen as women who should be treated differently. They always face comments and behaviours that are somehow sexually harassing for them. Newcomers in construction work feel particularly vulnerable to harassment, while women familiar with this situation can deal with it more knowledgeably:

*“In the workplace people cut jokes, flirt and even make gestures that indicate the desire of making physical advancement. Male construction workers prefer those female construction workers with whom they can flirt and have fun. Sometimes male co-workers offer me pan but I do not share their pan. Male construction workers who have known me for a long time tell me “oh nani [maternal grandmother] you are an old fashioned woman. Things have changed but you remain the same”. I tell them “I do not want to chew your pan, at first you will give me pan and then you will make excuses to get closer and eventually will try to share bed with me. I do not want to be a party to your touching, pushing, pressing game”. They laugh at me” (Rokeya, 43, married, mother of 6).*

Most female construction workers, like Rokeya, act tactfully since there is an abundant pool of female workers in the labour market. Female workers are particularly aware of their actions and behaviour because of the fear of losing work. Poor women have very limited economic opportunities, thus, they try to maintain their dignity by not offending others (Dannecker 2002; Mahmud and Kabeer 2003). Some of my participants told me that they would find work more frequently if they agreed to work as *jogalis* of *rajmistris*. Women who are not willing to work as *jogalis* of a *rajmistri* often forgo such offers very politely, for example, saying that they are new in this sector so do not know the names of different instruments, or that they have never worked as a *jogali* of a *rajmistri* before, and therefore do not have the required experience. Most female workers, instead, prefer to find quite painstaking work, such as roof making, brick or stone breaking, earth cutting or loading-unloading jobs in the construction sector. These sorts of work are often carried out in groups so women assume they are less likely to experience serious forms of sexual assault.

I also observed that women workers protect each other on many occasions by taking sides against abusive male co-workers and recruiters, and by making each other aware of sexually and/or financially exploitative recruiters by disseminating their experience in the meeting points. However, this is not to say that women only receive support from women, in fact, most of my participants told me that they shared friendly relations with a few male co-workers, as well, who supported them in many ways. Assia, a female participant, for instance, reflected on her experience of fighting against difficulties with the help of her male co-workers:

*“In the workplace we get to know male co-workers. I make friendship with a small number of men to get my things done. When other male co-workers cast an evil eye on me or when I fail to get my wages from the recruiters, they raise their voices in favour of me” (Assia, 29, migrated leaving husband back in home).*

Although female construction workers often get the support of their co-workers in the course of their work, sometimes they alone fight against exploitative co-workers and employers. The following quote illustrates how women now tend to protest against all sorts of injustice, including sexual harassment:

*“One day I was carrying loads on a construction site, and after carrying a bag full of cement I just sat on the stairs to have pan-supari... suddenly a supervisor appeared and he started screaming at me. He was saying, “hey why are you chewing pan-supari here?” I told him that I carried a cement bag, which no other workers did. He then asked me why I was retorting and called me names. I told him not to call me names and asked him to pay my wage so that I could leave. He denied to pay me and was asking “why are you asking for the money?” He also pushed me on my boobs. I got mad, slapped him and started screaming, “How dare you touch me? Am I your wife?” I was screaming at the top of my voice so all other workers also gathered round by then. The contractor also came to intervene. I told him that I went to do some work there, I did not go there to get myself harassed sexually. I also told them that there were many women around who were sexually available. If needed, they could go to them. Why were they troubling me? I had to take this step out of helplessness” (Rina, 37, deserted by husband, mother of a son).*

Studies of Bangladeshi factory workers documented that women often hesitate to report their own experience of sexual harassment (Paul-Majumder and Begum 2000; Siddiqi 2003b; Rahman 2010). Contrary to this, most of my participants, in addition to the stories of their co-workers, narrated their own stories to me. I believe my subject position as a friendly middle-class woman facilitated my access to such stories. Similar to Rina, another female construction worker, Kanchon, also protested boldly without fearing the patriarchal myth that women who face sexual harassment are not ‘good women’ themselves:

*“Once along with another female co-worker I was cleaning the floor on construction site. The supervisor (man) was just breathing on our neck, pretending to supervise our work. He had targeted us that morning and when we were almost done, my co-worker went to get an instrument and in the midst of this the man put his hand on my boobs. Without giving it a second thought I hit him with the instrument I was holding. His head started bleeding and he started hurling abuse at me saying “you slut! What I did that you hit me so hard”” (Kanchon, 36, married for a 2<sup>nd</sup> time, mother of a son).*

I observed that some female construction workers, instead of reacting violently, escape sexual harassment more tactfully as they perceive enraging their harasser may put them in further difficulties. Some of them told me that they consciously hid their frustration, unhappiness and anger in order to work without developing enmity with co-workers, recruiters and *sardars*, while others resort to manoeuvring the situation to save themselves from such harassment. Begum's story is one such example where a woman avoided sexual harassment using her ready wit and manoeuvring ability:

*"If someone in the workplace tries to make sexual advances, I do not express anger. If I get angry and say something bad, I would not get my wages. Furthermore, the person concerned may exert force on me, so I technically buy time [...] one day an employer told me that he liked me and wanted to marry me. I agreed and told him that in order to marry him I needed to spend more time with him to know him. I worked the whole day and at the end of the day when he was giving me wages I told him "you only gave me my regular payment. Is it your love for me? If you love me, give me the rikshaw fare". He gave me Tk 20 extra, than I told him "you love me too little that's why you did not give me money to eat something". He gave me Tk 30 more for food. I promised him to go to work at his place the next day and walked back home happily. Next morning he came to the point and was looking for me. I was hiding behind a shop and had requested my co-workers to tell him (if asked) that I had already been hired by someone for work" (Begum, 33, widowed, mother of 5).*

The strategy used by Begum finds resonance with Scott's (1987) 'weapons of the weak'; similar to Begum many of her co-workers used various indirect and individualised forms of resistance to avoid difficulties. While some of my female participants found these strategies extremely useful, others thought it might not work equally for all. Aleya, another female construction worker, thus, resorted to "direct negotiation" with sexually aggressive co-workers as she deemed herself "less tactful". She recalled a conversation with one of her male co-workers:

*"Sometimes male construction workers ask me, "would you like to come with me after work? You will get Tk 200 more". I tell them, "I do not do it! If you want, you can hire someone else". Once a male co-worker insisted that I hire a female worker with whom he could make sexual advances, accordingly I hired one for him. The woman whom I*

*hired for him also told me in advance that if there was only one man, he can pay Tk 300 but if there were more, each of them would have to pay separately. I agreed and took her to the man” (Aleya, 35, married, mother of 5).*

Most of my female participants echoed Aleya’s narrative and told me that this type of “proposal” is common in the workplace. Women working in construction, by and large, are young, widowed or deserted by husbands, or have migrated without their husbands, and are in extreme economic need. Men often try to take advantage of women’s vulnerability and use them to satisfy their own pleasure. Some men promise to marry female co-workers with whom they establish special relationships and allure them with the dream of a better future, though in reality most of these turned out to be false. Some others, in contrast, directly ask for sex in exchange for money or the assurance that they would recruit the particular female worker on a regular basis. As Dannecker (2002) claimed, I also argue that women make a rational choice, albeit in a highly restricted sense of ‘choice’, as to whether they take advantage of their sexual agency. In this way, women are to perform a constant dance, and have to learn the steps quickly in order to survive in this sector.

While some women resort to using their sexual agency, many others are cautious about the fact that indulging in ‘loose behaviour’ might confer them with the access to some extra income in the short term, but it eventually would tarnish their image as hardworking ‘good women’ which most of them do not want. The following comment clearly demonstrates that women deliberately keep themselves away from causing any rumour about their honour. As Ecevit (1991) and Bespinar (2010) noticed in the Turkish context that women, along with their family members, strive to safeguard their sexual reputations as ‘good women’, I saw similar efforts among the majority of my participants:

*“One day after finishing my work, I was coming back home when a male co-worker asked me to go with him. I asked him why I should go with him; only to sleep with him. I said, “look I do not have a husband and I do not want any. I can have sex with you a few times and then what? Now I am young that’s why you are after me, but what will happen when I grow older? You will just leave me behind. You will give me Tk 500 for a day but it is only once or twice. If I take this money today, it would help me to meet*



*some of my expenses but my name will be registered on the list of fallen women and if it is so, then why should I work hard. Why won't I do only that? I am sure I will be earning well and living a better life!'” (Rekha, 42, widowed, mother of 5).*

It has been documented that access to an independent income transforms individual woman's lives in many ways. I argue that it endows women with greater ability to move beyond the private sphere and talk about the issues they used to consider 'shameful' and 'unutterable'. Complaining about sexual harassment, negotiating with potential harassers, resisting it bravely or tactfully, promoting one's own sexual interest, and narrating their experiences of facing sexual assault, are not easy in a society like Bangladesh, where instead of the perpetrators, victims are often blamed. Some women, if not all, were seen transgressing the norm of silence and boldly talking about and protesting against it, which I would suggest is something that has hitherto been less practiced. I argue this also indicates women's awareness about their rights, and well-being, and their ability to pose challenges to existing male centred thinking.

### **Making choices of their own: remaining single or engaging in a new relationship**

In Bangladeshi society marriage remains the ultimate destiny for the majority of women. Accordingly, a woman without a husband is thought to be 'incomplete' (Chowdhury 2000) and vulnerable to a range of pressures (Kabeer 2007). As I mentioned in previous chapters, in Bangladeshi society a woman throughout her life is under the guardianship of men, namely father, husband and son. The myths of male breadwinner, male household head, and dependence and weakness of women are so deeply entrenched in society that women remaining single throughout their lives are perceived as a deviation from the norm. The situation is, however, changing, though slowly. None of my female participants had any voice in the process of their first marriages; the majority of them, however, made their own decisions regarding subsequent marriages if divorced, deserted by husbands or widowed.

As stated previously, in Bangladeshi society arranging marriages for marriageable sons and daughters is commonly perceived as a 'duty' by parents. This socio-cultural reality enables parents to exercise greater authority in arranging marriages for their children

(Rozario 2011). This is not to claim that all marriages are arranged and parents' authority in this regard is not contested; nevertheless arranged marriages are still widely valued. Even in arranged marriages the consent of both parties is very important from the Muslim religious point of view; although in reality women may not be given the opportunity to express their opinion regarding their own marriages. In fact, participating in discussions related to one's own marriage is deemed 'shameless' behaviour on the part of women, especially in rural areas. All my participants told me that their first marriages were arranged by their male kin and their consent hardly mattered. They reported that they experienced different levels of deprivation, exploitation and suffering in their marital home and were advised by family elders to accept it as their "destiny". In a patriarchal social context marriage is given such a high value that women, who are in unbearable situations, for example in abusive relationships, hardly receive any support from either their natal home or wider society to break the marital tie. However, the biographies of my participants made it evident that the situation is changing and women no longer allow themselves to be passive recipients of other people's decisions, this is particularly true for women who got married at least once. Of my participants and narrators who were remarried, all of them played an active role in selecting their husbands (Kanchon was forced to remarry but she said she had a voice in choosing the man). I argue that family's notion of shame, honour and purity undergoes significant modifications once women migrate from their familiar environment, enter into paid employment and/or experience marital break-up. Grover's (2009) study conducted in a Delhi slum found that love marriages are less likely to suffer from marital break-ups since in such cases women hardly receive support from their parents and kin. Lack of support from natal family effectively precludes women from walking out on their husbands. The study also revealed that arranged marriages usually have greater chances to fail as in such marriages women's fallback position tends to remain stronger. My participants, Afia, Fuleza and some of their female co-workers, were able to choose their husbands when they got married for the second time. Similar to the women of Grover's study, they also found no support during conjugal conflicts and difficult situations in their marital homes. For example, Afia found it too difficult to sever the marital tie with her second husband as she did not have anyone to provide her financial and/or emotional support. Conversely, Razia was the only female participant in my study whose experience found resonance with Grover's assertion that arranged marriages afford women better familial support when they want to break marital ties.

Razia got married to her aunt's son; the marriage was arranged by her father and aunt. In her marital home she was not very happy and conjugal conflicts were a regular occurrence. However, during such conflicts she often received support from her extended family members. She walked out on her husband when she found that her husband did not care for her and he was only after her father's wealth. On this occasion, also, her extended family stood by her which was not a common experience, at least amongst my participants. Razia did not want to accept her abusive husband's domination and comply with his desire to expropriate her patrimony; rather she preferred to relinquish the 'patriarchal bargain' and earn her own living by taking up paid work:

*"My husband was an ill-tempered man. Since the beginning he was very much interested about my father's property. After the death of my father, he started pressurizing me to sell out my patrimony. I did not agree, which led to serious conjugal conflict. It became clear to me that this man is after money, he is not after me. I had a 3 year old son, who also died within a couple of months of my father's death. I decided not to live with this husband anymore"* (Razia, 27, separated from husband).

She lost her mother in her childhood; and following the death of her father and son, Razia felt she did not have any obligation to continue the marital bond. When she spoke to me, she was still unwilling to get married again. Another participant, Feroza, also told me that after the death of her husband, she did not look for a husband who could provide her with food and shelter. In congruence with Kabeer (1997) and Feldman (2001), Feroza strongly sensed that the 'patriarchal bargain' is increasingly becoming a less viable option for women as poor men are mostly unable to emerge as sole breadwinners. She maintained that men often took a second wife so that they could live on their wives' earnings. She was not interested in getting involved in a relationship which could not offer her financial security but could lead her to more exploitative and conflicting situations in her marital home. Her decision to not marry again was also guided by the assumption that, if the second marriage did not work, she would be further blamed for not being a nice woman who could remain satisfied with one man:

*"Now I have become accustomed to earning my own living; I do not want a second husband. If I get married now and the husband does not sincerely discharge his*

*responsibilities as a provider, I will feel bad and think it would have been better if I were working! If I complain about him, people then will blame me and will regard that I do not want to live with one man; I just want to flirt with many” (Feroza, 37, widowed).*

The majority of my female participants, like Feroza, who were without husbands, seemed to be cautious about getting involved in a new relationship. Sheba’s comment reveals that temptations are all around but women make their choice consciously:

*“Male construction workers try to allure female co-workers in many ways. Sometimes I feel very restless as well as helpless. There are so many temptations of the good life but then again when I think about it deeply, I understand that these all are false promises. Men just want to take advantage of me” (Sheba, 28, deserted by husband, mother of 4).*

Female construction workers’ comments regarding their increased consciousness about getting involved in relationships was further reinforced by the comment of Durud, a male construction worker. He also perceived that female workers’ social awareness has increased. He recounted how it was trouble-free, even a few years ago, for the *rajmistris* to establish love affairs with female co-workers, trap them in a relationship and eventually leave them on their own. Women often failed to trace these men or bring them before justice due to lack of knowledge about the existing laws, absence of necessary documents and lack of information about the person concerned. Durud maintained that these incidences are less prevalent in recent times, which also indicates women’s awareness about their own well-being.

A slightly different story of exercising agency was described by Fuleza, a female construction worker, who married for the second time. Like Razia, Feroza, Rabu, Fateha- and many others- could not resist the temptation of a better life by marrying an already married man. She, however, refused to have more children with her second husband as she already had her desired number of children:

*“After divorcing my first husband, I thought I would not marry again but another man started proposing to me persistently and eventually I gave in. My heart melted and I agreed to marry him. My second husband wanted children from me but I turned down his desire. I told him that I had a son and 2 daughters from my first marriage and I did*

*not want more children. If he wanted, he could produce more children with his first wife. My husband had produced 3 more children with his first wife” (Fuleza, 33, mother of 3, married for the 2<sup>nd</sup> time).*

Although Fuleza’s account showed that women’s economic independence facilitates their negotiation of some of the important issues with their husbands, it also illustrated how women in a male dominated society fall victim to the widespread belief that a woman needs male protection to lead her life. Similarly, Afia described how she felt obliged to marry a second time when her second husband spread a rumour about their marriage. Before their marriage, her present husband was trying to convince her to marry him, she refused him initially. The man, however, did not give in; he tried a few things and ultimately went to the meeting point where she used to wait in the morning to find work and asked *sardars* not to recruit her anymore. Afia found herself in immense financial and social trouble as no one was willing to recruit her and co-workers were making fun of her. So, finally, she decided to marry the person. Kanchon’s story revealed that although she herself did not want a second husband, her brothers and their spouses induced her to get married as they did not want to take care of her for the rest of her life. She was already working in construction but it was not enough for her extended family members to think that she could take care of herself:

*“I struggled a lot with my son, I used to take him to construction sites with me as I did not have anyone to look after him at home. My brothers and their wives told me that as a woman I would not be able to lead my life alone. They said, “moreover, if you get unwell and cannot earn your living, who is going to take care of you?” Consequently, my brothers arranged my marriage with my present husband” (Kanchon, 36, married for a 2<sup>nd</sup> time, mother of a son).*

Parallel to the findings of Kibria (1995), Kabeer (1997), Amin et al. (1997), Salway et al. (2003) and Rahman (2010), I also found that the ability to earn on a regular basis obviously gives women a sense of self-reliance, of standing on their own feet. Women also value their greater mobility and autonomy, new social networks and relatively enhanced bargaining stance within the home because of their economic contribution. Despite these important shifts, a few basic ideologies continue to remain persuasive; relying on men for protection is one such ideology.

It emerged from the accounts of my participants that women are now more aware and they are using agency in making vital decisions about their lives. This increased sense of agency can be seen as a positive outcome of their involvement in the labour force. We, however, also saw that women on many occasions could not maintain their resistance in the face of the constant pressures of wider society and family, which ultimately led them to make compromises. I argue that the process of gendering (Bradley 2007) or socialisation of women in Bangladeshi society, and the widespread myth of male supremacy, influences women's worldview in a way which makes it difficult for them to overtly challenge the myth of male protection in their lives.

Why do women remain committed to marriages even though many of them have bad experiences and also when they are aware, at least to some extent, of their ability to survive on their own? I contend that even in extreme circumstances women weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of remaining in marriages. The example of my participant, Mahmuda, might be useful to understand this claim. Mahmuda was unhappy with her abusive husband but she did not leave him. She was always critical of her female co-workers who got married after experiencing desertion or widowhood, but were unable to find peace and/or happiness. She wished that instead of submitting themselves (female co-workers) to unhappy marriages, they had relied on their own ability to lead an independent life. She herself, however, had clinged to her unhappy marriage for the sake of her 6 daughters. She acknowledged that, on the one hand, her husband's unworthiness, constant presence at home and authoritarian attitudes irritated her; his presence, on the other hand, gave her some sort of assurance that unscrupulous men from the neighbourhood would not be able to come closer to her daughters, with ill-motives along sexual lines. She also repeatedly reminded me that her daughters would need a father, in her words a "real guardian" in times of their marriage. And also, given the lack of social security in their dwelling arrangements, raising 6 daughters without a nominal male guardian in a less familiar social milieu was perceived as almost an unattainable task by Mahmuda. My observations suggest that marriage in many cases exposes women to a wide range of exploitations, deprivations, sufferings and difficulties. Women, who are living without husbands, can escape their husbands' violence and exploitation, but they are then also more likely to face enormous problems from their male co-workers, neighbours and wider society. In a patriarchal context

where society is habituated to think that women on their own are weak, vulnerable and thus approachable; and that they should seek protection from men; where women's desire and ability to control their own lives is often interpreted and defamed as loose behaviour; in such circumstances women may understandably feel less able to contest existing cultural practices. Thus, while I am not saying that many women do not live on their own, nevertheless it is still expected that women should not break marital ties. I contend, however that both those women who remain in marriages despite being in a miserable situation or those who walk out on their husbands knowing well that various socioeconomic challenges will come on their way, clearly make carefully considered decisions that seem most appropriate to their personal circumstances. In other words, I found from the women in my study that their behaviours and actions are entirely understandable and that as Clisby and Holdsworth (2014:4) similarly found in their research, 'women are reflexive and situated knowers who are able to coherently articulate how processes of gendering can and do have an impact on their sense of self, and on the lived realities of their everyday lives'.

### **Women upholding men's importance**

As I already mentioned, a good number of women in Bangladesh are now taking up paid employment to earn their own living as they do not have a reliable male breadwinner. Bangladeshi society continues to adhere to the extensive belief of the importance of a man in a woman's life. Practically though, these women are facing a sort of role reversal as they are taking on the role of main or significant providers, including having dependent husbands. In this study I found that women's roles both at the household and the societal levels have altered to a great extent with the change of their individual circumstances, but society's expectation for women to unconditionally conform to cultural norms and maintain the image of ideal type 'good women' has not changed significantly. Society still tends to believe that no matter whether a woman can take care of herself and her family she needs a man in her life to protect her. A woman's struggle to live a respectful life on her own seldom receives appreciation from the society; rather she is often told to seek protection from a man and if she resists, she is likely to be seen as too 'liberated' and 'immodest', a woman who does not care for her *izzat*. Begum, a female participant, who left her abusive husband and decided not to take

him back in her life, had to change her decision. Her landlord, who practically played the role of her guardian in Sylhet in the absence of her male kin, convinced her to keep the marital tie. She eventually agreed, considering her social vulnerability and the reaction of the wider society:

*“I had migrated to Sylhet after having a conflict with my husband. A couple of months later, my husband also followed me to Sylhet. At first I did not want to allow him to stay with us then my husband requested my landlord to make me understand. Landlord told me, “look, in any way you need a husband and it is not very easy for you to find another man since you have children from the first marriage”. I also thought that if I had a husband, people would think twice before taking undue advantage of me” (Begum, 33, widowed, mother of 5).*

A similar feeling to that of Begum’s was reflected by Afia. She could not leave her husband even though knowing well that he had another family, and that his other family did not want Afia to live under the same roof. She, nevertheless, tried to keep the marital tie intact as it was her second marriage and leaving this husband would attach serious stigma that she was only a “fun loving loose woman”. Most of my married female participants, who were unhappy with their husbands, could not muster the courage to leave their abusive and irresponsible husbands due to the fact that they were fearful, like Afia, that society would not respond positively to a woman who had left her husband. Sheba, a female construction worker, whose husband all of a sudden left her along with 4 young children, kept chasing her husband to get him back. She believed her young children, especially her 3 daughters needed their father to be there when they grew up and she also needed him to protect her from the “evil eyes” of co-workers and men in the neighbourhood. Assia, who did not want her husband to live with her, also felt that the pressure and temptation from aspirant men would have lessened had he lived with her.

It thus emerged from the accounts of female participants that they are often influenced by the widespread saying that women cannot take care of their well-being; that they need a male guardian to take care of them. As such, Ayesha, who was a widow and did not have a male child, told me that she did not feel ashamed to work in construction, like many other female co-workers, as she neither had a husband nor a son. Although



she struggled a lot in her life after the death of her husband and raised her 5 daughters alone, she neither recognised nor valued her own strength. Rather, despondently, she maintained that a woman without a husband or son could not expect better. Some of my participants termed husbands as “umbrellas” over one’s head which protects women from adverse weather, as such they do every possible thing to maintain a hold on this “umbrella”. Rekha, for instance, had been working in construction for many years but seemed not very happy with her work when I spoke with her, though she was not thinking about searching for other jobs. She mentioned the importance of the presence of a husband and expressed her belief that a woman is less wise than a man:

*“I do not think about the gain and loss of doing construction work, I just want to do something to earn some money in order to survive along with my kids. A husband is like an umbrella for a woman and I do not have that umbrella over my head, so who would give me a good suggestion? A woman does not possess much intelligence the way a man does” (Rekha, 42, widowed, mother of 5).*

Despite women’s visible socioeconomic contribution to family welfare, neither women and their immediate family members, nor wider society, acknowledges this. Indeed, despite the fact that a greater number of women are now experiencing a reversal in their roles this goes largely unrecognised. Rather, their contribution is ‘naturalised’ in the name of ‘maternal instinct’ and women’s ‘responsibility’ to their children and family. In a patriarchal context, irrespective of women’s contribution and struggle, men continue to occupy a privileged position both in the household and wider society. Since widespread cultural norms accord men a superior position over women, women themselves also find it difficult to put aside their social learning and challenge the myth that husbands are “omniscient”. They have learned that being male is equated to being superior and can also see that men are destined to have more freedom of choice both in personal and social realms, but that they do not have similar rights. I contest that this way of thinking not only confers privileges on men but also hinders women’s potential to use their greater agency.

### **Being unfaithful is nothing but ‘male nature’: the female perspective**

As I have argued, in Bangladeshi society men enjoy more privileges in both home and wider society and the differential treatment of a boy and a girl child starts from birth and continues throughout life (Jahan 1975; Chowdhury 2000). Men often take advantage of the privileges offered to them by society and men of poorer strata are more likely to adhere to such gender-based notions of superiority to express their manhood. All of my participants believed that men are superior to women in society and there is no way that women can gain equal status with men. The constitution of Bangladesh accords equal rights to all its citizens however cultural norms generally assign separate standards of rights, responsibilities and morality for men and women. For example, in Bangladeshi society women are viewed as the *izzat* of the family and as such, their sexual actions are under constant scrutiny. A woman’s reputation to be a ‘good woman’ matters to her husband and extended family members. Conversely, however, a husband’s infidelity elicits little societal or familial opprobrium (Dube 1997). For instance, in the case of one of my female participants, Begum’s husband left her behind in their village home after a few days of their marriage, to take a second wife. After revealing this, she was reluctant to continue conjugal relations with her husband. Her parents, however, persuaded her to keep the marital bond intact, they neither blamed the man for breaking trust nor tried to understand her perspective. Begum’s parents’ conservative attitude finds resonance with the view of Kajol, a male construction worker, who narrated from his own experience that regardless of the extent of a husband’s abusive behaviour or marital disloyalty a woman rarely gets her natal family’s support when she wants to break the tie.

A number of my female participants told me that their husbands cheated on them, maintained relationships with other women and even got married secretly without informing them. As stated before, according to the law, a husband must obtain the permission of his first wife in order to have a second wife (Khan 1993). However, it is only a formality because if a man strongly desires a second marriage, it is highly unlikely that his wife will be able to stop him (Ali 2002; Khan 1993). Women often comply with their husbands’ wishes fearing divorce and desertion which further renders them vulnerable both socially and economically. It is not uncommon for men to take advantage of women’s vulnerability and given this, female participants seemed to accept the prevalent social saying that being unfaithful to wives is ‘natural’ for men.

Rina, a female construction worker, narrated how her husband initiated an illicit relation with another woman when he was married to her:

*“My husband was a rajmistri. He used to work in different places for months. Gradually he reduced communication with me and told me that he had started a new family in the place where he was working at that time. Men habitually do that. When they are away from home for a longer period, they often get involved with other women” (Rina, 37, deserted by husband, mother of a son).*

Although the incidence saddened Rina deeply, she was not surprised because this happens regularly, especially in the lives of poor Bangladeshi women. A parallel tale was echoed by Swapna whose husband started another family and kept her in the dark about it for years. When she came to know about his secret family, she neither walked out on him nor questioned him. Rather she argued that as long as he was discharging his responsibility as a provider, it was meaningless on her part to create “unnecessary” tension by confronting him:

*“My husband was a construction worker. Initially he was nice and we were happily married. He used to work on different construction sites with female co-workers. In the workplace he got attracted to a female co-worker and got married to her secretly. I did not know anything about it. Once a woman of my neighbourhood told me that she coincidentally met my husband with his other wife and child in the hospital. I told her if he gives me food, clothes and shelter adequately then what can I say if he gets married for a second time?” (Swapna, 38, deserted by husband).*

The majority of my female participants seemed to accept the widespread belief that to be male means to have the right to breach the marital commitments and engage in extra marital affairs. Afia’s statement, however, revealed that women do not accept men’s infidelity only because they have learnt to compromise through the process of socialisation, but they refrain from challenging men because it can lead to a violent reaction on man’s part:

*“My husband is having extra marital affairs with other women. He is a man, he would go to different places, meet lots of women and flirt with them. If I try to know*

*everything, I will not be able to continue conjugal relations with him. My husband's first wife also knows that he flirts with many women, consequently, sometimes she fights with him. I, however, keep quiet. If I say anything, he will get enraged and only calm down after beating me up" (Afia, 34, married for a 2<sup>nd</sup> time, mother of 6).*

It appears from the accounts of female participants that they accept men's marital infidelity, to a certain extent, because of the ongoing propaganda that it is 'natural' for men to be unfaithful and the concept of marital fidelity is only applicable to women. Participant women's accounts further reveal that despite knowing about their husbands' infidelity, they do not try to monitor their movements or consider keeping an eye on them as they deem it would not do any good, rather it would cause more pain. While no matter whether men are loyal to their wives, they want their wives to be unquestionably faithful to them. Begum's husband cheated on her repeatedly but he could not accept the same thing done by Begum. Pyke (1996) argues that poor men who lack the perceived necessary masculine authority in the public sphere and who are violent and unfaithful are more likely to keep their wives under constant critical surveillance. In congruence with this observation the majority of my married female participants reported that their husbands often criticise them for not being loyal, restrict their movement and contact with male co-workers, and keep an eye on them. Their assurance of not indulging in inappropriate behaviour in the workplace cannot stop their husbands' from questioning their sexual honesty:

*"My husband went to work in the construction sector and saw that men often put their hands on women workers, touch them improperly and make sexual advances. Consequently he became suspicious about me and kept asking what I did in the workplace. When I used to make him understand that I took good care of myself, he used to make comments, such as "how come these men make sexual advances to other women and spare only you?"" (Begum, 33, widowed, mother of 5).*

Surmounting various social, religious, economic and personal dilemmas, women join the construction sector, but none of them told me that they voluntarily chose to join the labour force. They took up paid employment to meet a critical need; nevertheless, they continued to suffer humiliation. Most of my female participants hid the fact from their extended family members and acquaintances that they worked in construction as it

invokes negative reactions. Especially in rural areas, women's paid employment in construction is seen as a gross violation of social norms and women engaged in such employment are considered to be of loose moral character. Kanchon, a female participant, recounted that they not only suffer denigration by the people around them, the people who live off their hard earned money also do not think highly of them. When her first husband left her with a young child, her brothers and their wives forced her to marry a second time. Her second husband, though, did not discharge his responsibility as a husband and she continued to earn for the family. He, however, did not hesitate to insult her for being a construction worker:

*“Whenever my husband and I fight, he tells me, “you slut, you flirt and have sex with male co-workers”. If we neighbours get involved in a fight then also, women who do not work as construction workers, tease us saying that we are available to all our male co-workers” (Kanchon, 36, married for a 2<sup>nd</sup> time, mother of a son).*

I argue that women's increased participation in the labour market, and other interrelated socio-cultural changes- such as new living arrangements, female headed households, more social acceptance for women's waged work, and independent movement- have not significantly altered society's views regarding women's ability and power. I contest, because of social constraints (e.g., sexual harassment, rumours, gossip and labelling) women sometimes consciously accept their husbands' misdemeanours and keep the marital bond intact as it, at least, provides some sense of social protection in the wider socio-cultural context.

### **Using agency to retain control over income**

Although a large number of men in Bangladesh at present are unable or simply unwilling to support their family financially with their single incomes, society still continues to adhere to the patriarchal ideology that men are the providers for their dependants. As I mentioned in previous sections, a great majority of women in Bangladesh are now carrying out the role of principal providers for their family or at least contribute a great deal to the household budget as they are no longer able to rely on the 'patriarchal bargain'. Nevertheless, the widespread prevalence of male breadwinner

ideologies in Bangladeshi society means that many men continue to believe that they have the absolute right over the household and its members and as such, they tend to feel they have inviolable rights over their wives' earnings. Societal norms are also in favour of women relinquishing control over their own incomes in favour of men. Studies conducted in Bangladesh have demonstrated that in most cases women clandestinely keep a portion of their incomes (Kibria 1995; Kabeer 1997 and 2000). Overtly establishing rights over their own resources is not 'culturally appropriate behaviour' for Bangladeshi women as it is considered tantamount to defiance of male authority. In line with this observation, comments of my male participants also reveal that a woman is not "good enough" if she does not forgo control over her income in favour of her husband. Studies reveal that women face serious antagonism from their husbands if their secret savings become public (Kabeer 1997; Salway et al. 2003; Rahman 2010). One of my participants told me that she did not even dare to retain small amounts of her wages for her personal consumption as she perceived that it would be more problematic for her if her husband came to know about it.

Women, through the processes of gendering (Bradley 2007) learned that they not only need to conform to the social expectations, but they also accept the guardianship and authority of men no matter what the circumstances are. As such, all of my married participants tend to believe that their husbands have the right to know the details about their earnings and its allocation, while the same is not true for men. Though the money was earned by women, both men and women seemed to take it for granted that women must not have full control over its allocation. As a result, women generally resort to retaining a share of their earnings covertly. However, when the women keep back some of their money, they rarely spend it on themselves. Rather they use it to meet their children's demands or to develop savings for the future.

*"Sometimes I keep a small amount in my hands and give my husband the rest and tell him that I got only that much. I try to save this small amount for the future of my children" (Sajeda, 28, married, mother of 2).*

A small number of my participants, however, overtly kept their earnings under their control as they were not financially dependent on their husbands or not living under one roof with their husbands. Shaheda, a female participant, who migrated to the city

leaving her husband in their village home managed to reach an agreement that she would neither ask him for money nor send him money.

*“I do not send my earnings to my husband, he also does not send me money. My husband asks for money frequently, he says, “you earn well so give me some money”. I, however, do not give him money readily. Sometimes I give him Tk 400-500, he spends everything on gambling. I tell him, “being a woman I earn a living for me and my daughter, and you want me to give you money!” At that moment he becomes a bit flexible and asks for a little money. Then I tell him “you are a man you cannot earn, you ask money from a woman!” He is absolutely left with no answer when I make comments like this” (Shaheda, 25, married, mother of a daughter, migrated leaving husband in village home).*

Both Shaheda and her husband in principle agree that a man should provide for his family. Shaheda’s husband’s inability to provide for them awarded her more control over her earnings. However, it is not the case for the majority of women. The failure of husbands to emerge as providers did not appear to constrain them from feeling they had inviolable rights over their wives’ earnings and enforcing authority over them. I, nevertheless, observed that husbands who do not live with their wives and keep other wives simultaneously somehow lose the strong ground of claiming a share of their wives’ money. Hasna’s story revealed how she felt about her husband’s claim on her earnings when he took a second wife:

*“My husband used to come to me to snatch away my tiny savings and spend it on his second family. In case of denial, he used to beat me severely. Now I do not allow him to do so and I told him that I was not going to tolerate my hard earned money being spent on his other family. Since he does not love me anymore, he has no claim over my earnings” (Hasna, 28, married, mother of 2 daughters).*

Studies conducted in Bangladesh and elsewhere have found that entering into the labour force enhances women’s bargaining stance within the home to some extent (Hashemi et al. 1996; Newby 1998; Adato et al. 2000; Zaman 2001; Kabeer 2000; Salway et al. 2005; Holvoet 2005; Khosla 2009; Rahman 2010). I found the same for the participant female construction workers. Women who were separated, deserted and widowed in

most cases were the sole or main providers of their households; absence of husbands enabled them to use their agency in the home with fewer constraints. My participant, Hamida, for example, though she had 2 grown up sons and a married daughter, was able to make decisions about financial, familial and personal issues. Hamida recounted how her ability to establish absolute control over her earnings potentially minimised the need on her part to follow her children and/or other male kin. A significant portion of my married participants were also seen to establish covert or overt control over their earnings, despite society's sanctions.

Aklima, although she had contributed all her earnings to her household previously, resolved not to do the same again and wanted to have a greater control over her incomes in future. From her past experiences she realised establishing control over her money might upset her family members for a while but it would eventually be beneficial for her own well-being. As mentioned previously, Shaheda, Fuleza, Jorina, Hasna and others who were married but not living with husbands permanently, employed various forms of resistance (e.g., drawing on normative gender discourses of masculinity and femininity to cast shame on husbands; reminding them of their inability to live up to their breadwinner role) simultaneously to retain some control and restrict husbands' authority over their earnings. Coomi was unable to establish control over her earnings, but she was fully aware of her ability to earn and contribute to the family. Though Coomi, Minara and many others apparently prevented themselves from using agency to retain control over their incomes, it was not the case that they were unable to use their agency at all. My observation suggests that female participants who relinquished control over their earnings, nevertheless possessed greater confidence and higher self-esteem because they knew they were economically more powerful now that they brought their own incomes into the household. I contend that surrendering their entire earnings in favour of economically dependent husbands is also a form of resistance on the part of women. By doing this they indirectly inform their husbands about their own ability and husbands' parallel inability to earn for the family. Relinquishing incomes in favour of husbands was also used by women as a strategy to heal the wounds of the familial relationship for the betterment of their households. Thus, regardless of women's ability to retain absolute control over their resources, earning an income definitely awards them some self-confidence, self-respect and awareness of their position and contribution in the home. Yet, I contest that establishing overt control over own earnings is obviously a



manifestation of greater agency on the part of women, which not only enhances their status within the household but also confers on them self-respect to deal with their co-workers, relatives, friends and wider society.

### **Women upholding self-respect**

Similar to the findings of the studies conducted on factory workers in Bangladesh, I also found that paid employment brings many positive changes in women's lives, including awarding them a sense of self-respect and esteem (see Kibria 1995; Kabeer 1997; Zaman 2001; Rahman 2010). Though all of my female participants were involuntarily pushed into the labour market and a great majority of them seemed not to take much pleasure in their work for a range of rational reasons, their comments, nevertheless, demonstrate their enhanced sense of self-esteem and confidence. Sajeda, a female construction worker, for example, told me that before joining construction work her mother-in-law was very hostile towards her and often used to drive her out from the house. She, thus, had to take refuge in her brother's house on and off. Although her brother was willing to help, her sense of self-respect suffered a great deal as long as she was completely dependent on others. Her entry into paid employment facilitated her with the capacity to support herself and her children with her own earnings. Sajeda acknowledged with satisfaction that she could survive without asking for help from others which makes her feel better and enhances her sense of self-worth. Like Sajeda, Shaheda's account also illustrated how she felt about relying on others' money and avoided it deliberately:

*"I never ask my co-workers to buy me tea or something. If someone spends on me, s(he) will also want me to spend. I even do not make my brother or nephew spend on me. If my brother buys me tea, he might think that he had to spend the money on me because he took me to work. He may tell his wife that he bought me tea or cookies, which I do not want" (Shaheda, 25, married, mother of a daughter, migrated leaving husband in village home).*

Besides enhancing women's sense of self-reliance and self-esteem, paid employment and economic independence contribute to bringing about a shift in women's status

within the home, though in varying degrees. Hasna, who was completely dependent on her husband and was unable to protest any of his unjust behaviour and action, experienced a transformation in her own perception once she started earning an income:

*“Before joining the labour force I had to depend on my husband literally for everything. If he was in a good mood, he used to get things for us and when he was out of mood, he used to scream at me. Now there is no such issue. If he gets angry and say bad things to me, I also argue with him” (Hasna, 28, married, mother of 2 daughters).*

Nevertheless, women appeared not to dare to take overt pride in their financial contributions to their households and in most cases continued to remain, at least on the surface, as subservient as they were before joining the labour force, partly to avoid domestic conflicts and partly to conform to the social norm of ‘good women’. In this effort to uphold their image as ‘good women’, women often endure husbands’ violent behaviour in the home. They however, tend not to tolerate it in public once they enter into the labour force and create their own identity. Assia left her husband in their village home because of his irrational and unkind behaviour and did not want him back as his presence did not seem to lessen her struggle for survival; rather it often exposed her to more embarrassing situations as he frequently initiated fights, called her names and physically abused her in front of her neighbours. Parallel to Assia, Rahima also told me that after migrating to Sylhet and joining the construction sector, she became more careful about her behaviour and wanted to maintain the image of a “nice” woman. A similar feeling was echoed by Rekha, who was not happy with the existing competition in the labour market and the ensuing job shortages which often rendered her jobless. She dejectedly recalled that when she joined construction work she was better able to support her family and fulfil their needs, but the situation changed as more and more people joined the labour market without any substantial increase in the demand for labourers. She, nonetheless, felt good to think that she still earned her living by working hard in the construction sector and did not need to engage in unsavoury alternatives, such as sex work or begging, which she found extremely undignified.

Like her female co-workers, Mahmuda was also against taking easy options to secure her livelihood. It was evident from her account that women were increasingly becoming aware of their own power and were beginning to believe in themselves. She also

perceived that the ‘patriarchal bargain’ was increasingly becoming more costly for the majority of women. She wondered why women still placed themselves in difficulties by trusting men’s word:

*“A few female construction workers fall in the trap of love with male co-workers and get married to them. However, after a short period of time these men go away without looking back. I do not understand- why do women need such marriages? Since I have contravened the norm of purdah to join the labour force, I better earn my own living. There is no point in getting married to such a man who is with me today but there is no guarantee that he will be there with me tomorrow” (Mahmuda, 35, married, mother of 6).*

Although Mahmuda was aware that marriage did not offer a bright prospect for most of them and was advocating in favour of relying on one’s own ability to earn a livelihood, she herself, nevertheless, could not leave her abusive husband. It reflects that even though women understand that for the majority of them the ‘patriarchal bargain’ is nothing but a patriarchal myth, in most cases they feel they cannot act upon it because they are constrained by the wider social-cultural values. Society continues to deem that women need protection and marriage is considered the ultimate solution that can give women security and help them live a respectful life. Women, therefore, tend to conform to society’s expectation as ‘good women’, at least on the surface, overtly, even if they are able to develop greater self-worth, esteem and agency more covertly.

## **Conclusion**

Women’s roles have become more conspicuous in both the public and private realms, and the paid employment of women is becoming increasingly necessary; nevertheless their bargaining power remains circumscribed. Structural factors underpin women’s ongoing circumscription: a host of cultural norms including limitations on women’s mobility, the gendered differentiation of rights, responsibilities and privileges, and the requirement of particular gendered characteristics such as self-sacrifice, docility, and conformity. Such negative stereotyping is experienced by women from a wide variety of backgrounds, and it has the effect of devaluing women’s economic roles. Rahman

(2010) argues that, because in Bangladesh the social construction of womanhood allows little room for the positive regard of women's paid employment beyond domestic confines, women workers are up against structural constraints. As a result, women's paid employment exposes them to different sorts of exploitation, humiliation and vulnerability both inside and outside the home.

Nevertheless, while an increase in women's contribution in the household economy and new roles in society have not – at least not as yet - resulted in bringing dramatic shifts in wider social structures pertaining to women's rights and status, it is evident that the expansion of economic opportunities for women has been a powerful force for change under many different circumstances. Whilst social structures constrain individual's actions, simultaneously individual's actions also reshape social structures. According to Connell (1987), women's agencies have the potential to transform structures; I argue that female construction workers' practices and actions do contribute to meaningful changes in social structures. In this study, I came across specific instances of women gaining material and personal benefits from their waged employment, and thinking beyond the existing role-relations of men and women assigned by the cultural norms of society. Women's access to an independent income helps them to challenge the existing model of the male breadwinner, and to transform the nature of the patriarchal control within the home to some extent. A significant portion of my participants expressed the conviction of not abandoning their economic roles on the basis of verbal assurance of male protection from their husbands or aspirant men. Rather they defined their work as a permanent way of life, an aspect hitherto atypical in the context of Bangladesh. A few of them used their sexual capital to draw on the maximum benefit which also illustrated their ability to make deliberate choices albeit in a very restricted sense of choice.

The women's earning power generated or enhanced their marital autonomy: that is, some women were emboldened to leave abusive husbands, and to determine their futures in terms of having children and re-marriage, other women were empowered to work out more equitable relations with their husbands. Thus, paid employment has brought women a sense of self and identity. Women resisting sexual harassment boldly and talking about it courageously, also, were not so prevalent in Bangladeshi society in recent years. They exercised agency in the form of 'bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance' (Kabeer 1999:438). Women

were also seen to have the vision for their future as independent beings, without attaching it to their husbands or male children, which is also a new trend in the Bangladeshi context. Instead of relying on male family members, many of them seemed to be more reliant on the social networks they created. Shifts are underway, although of course these shifts are not undergone by all women in identical ways. Fuleza, a female participant, for instance, narrated her future plans, which clearly reflect her capacity to define her own life choices and to pursue her own goals, even in the face of opposition from her husband:

*“My second husband often asks me to leave construction work but I do not pay him heed. I cannot rely on him completely as he has another wife and he is the father of her children. I want to save money by working in construction but do not want to work here for too long as the work is extremely draining. When I am able to accumulate a sizeable amount, I will go back to my village home. I will set up a small tea shop in the neighbourhood to earn my living. I am also thinking about buying a piece of land and cultivating it with the help of my male cousins. I know how to weave fishing nets so I will try to make some extra money by using that skill. If my husband wants to be with me, he is welcome; if he does not want to come, still I will stick to my plan” (Fuleza, 33, married, mother of 3).*

Kabeer (1991) notes that women employ a range of strategies in their endeavours to make social structures less oppressive and therefore more amenable to their needs. In line with Kabeer I also contest that, much as cultural constraints and dominant gender ideologies maintain a powerful grip on women’s choices and actions, women are gradually surmounting the cultural constrictions and reshaping them via their discourses and activities. Women, on many occasions, are not doing what they really want to; rather they are performing the roles of good women fearing the wrath of socio-cultural norms and sanctions. Women are performing a complex and nuanced dance of negotiation around these contested and contradictory norms. Bangladeshi society is trying to sustain the chimera of outdated patriarchal norms which do not and cannot fit with the actual complex material realities of contemporary society in an increasingly globalised world. I argue, and as my research has demonstrated, Bangladeshi society is at something of a crossroads, struggling to maintain an increasingly unstable chimera in the face of shifting gender roles and constructs.

## **Chapter IX: Summary and conclusion**

A key aim that underpinned this study was to address the dearth of systematic research exploring people's - and in particular women's - engagement in physical labour in the construction sector in Bangladesh. The specific intent of the study was to investigate constructions of masculinities, femininities and changing gender relations in contemporary Bangladesh in relation to women's paid employment in a heavily male dominated sphere such as construction. The choice of the topic was largely dictated by the fact that construction is a growing industry in contemporary Bangladesh and emerged as one of the major employers of female labour in recent decades. The type of work women do in construction requires them to work long hours, working in public places, under the open sky and often with male co-workers, which is a multiple contravention of the norms of *purdah* as perceived in the context of Bangladesh. Nevertheless, the number of women in this sector has continued to increase since the 1990s. Scholars, activists and policy makers have predominantly focused on the female factory workers, the implications of their paid employment, their lived experiences and so on. The situation of women who are engaged in the informal sector, such as construction, has tended to remain largely ignored and understudied in Bangladesh and as such basic questions concerning their experiences remained unanswered. It was this lacuna I wished to address in this study.

As such, I aspired to bridge the missing link and to explore how women's employment in the construction sector affects existing gender relations in patriarchal Bangladeshi society. I was particularly interested in looking at questions such as: how do women negotiate with their male family members, particularly husbands, about entering the sector? Does waged work ease women's domestic responsibilities or is it only an addition to women's already heavy workload so that they end up doing the 'double shift'? How do men feel when their wives join the labour force? Are patriarchal practices within the household transformed? How do men feel when their wives become the principal or significant provider for the household? Does paid employment enhance women's status within the household? How do women experience the outside world? Can women use their agency both at the household and societal levels? How does society perceive women's employment in the construction sector? These are the key

questions pursued in this study to obtain a broader understanding of the changing gender relations experienced by Bangladeshi male and female construction workers, and the husbands of female construction workers.

Masculinities, femininities and gender relations are not fixed categories. Rather they are flexible and contextual and as such, nuanced, complex and contested. I, therefore, tried to explore as many dimensions as possible of my participants' experiences through qualitative ethnographic engagement to develop a more holistic understanding of constructions of masculinities, femininities and changing gender relations in a specific arena in contemporary Bangladesh. Data for my ethnographic study were generated from three purposively selected construction workers congregation points of Sylhet city. In Sylhet city I spent prolonged periods of time at congregating points, on construction sites and in participants' home environments. I interviewed a total of 40 female and 20 male participants. Although female construction workers were the main focus of my study, I included men because women do not experience social reality in a vacuum and no gender analyses can be complete without taking into consideration both men's and women's perspectives. Observation was an important instrument of data generation, which was not only helpful in validating and verifying the interview data but also helped me to develop a deeper understanding of the inner dynamics at play. First-hand accounts of both male and female participants were used to compare and contrast with theoretical insights into masculinity, femininity and gender relations from feminist, social science, and gender and development literature; and also to empirically explore in greater detail the questions I posed earlier.

Researching men, as a relatively young female researcher, in a patriarchal society like Bangladesh, continues to be challenging. There is a tendency to assume that there are advantages for researchers who conduct research with people of their own gender as compared with researching amongst those of a different gender (see, for example, Lee 1997). This may be true in many contexts, however it is important to acknowledge that gender is not the only significant variable at play in these relationships. Rather it is the intersectional subject position of the researcher that is critical. As I discussed in greater detail in Chapter III, my subject position as an educated middle-class woman studying at a British University, as well as being a permanent resident of Sylhet city, placed me

in a relatively secure position and removed many potential barriers in the course of researching men.

In Bangladeshi society men are customarily responsible for providing for women and children, while women are liable for all productive and reproductive tasks that take place within the home. Society tends to cherish and idealise this demarcation between men's and women's worlds. Socioeconomic reality, however, does not allow men and women to strictly adhere to this separate spheres ideology. Women's participation in paid employment in Bangladeshi society, nevertheless, often attracts negative attention partly because it contravenes norms of *pardah* and partly because it is considered to be an indication of the inability of the male members of the households to emerge as able providers for their dependants.

As I mentioned in Chapter II, after national independence from Pakistan in 1971, the country underwent significant socioeconomic changes. The newly independent country's constitution accorded women and men equal rights in all spheres of life; in order to enhance women's status in society different measures were also taken to incorporate them in the development process through engaging women in economic activities. A small number of women of relatively privileged backgrounds came out of their households to join the white-collar workforce as new opportunities opened up for them in this changing scenario. As for women of poorer households, they were pushed into the labour market as the economic context worsened for them because most of them either did not have male breadwinners or had incapable male breadwinners, which required them to earn their own livelihood. Unavailability of male support and a parallel lack of income earning opportunities in rural areas stimulated rural-urban migration of a large number of women. This trend of migration has also contributed to a massive urbanisation in major Bangladeshi cities. Despite being an agriculture-based economy, post-independence Bangladesh experienced a rapid urbanisation process as more and more people had migrated to the cities with the intent of earning a livelihood (see Kuhn 2000 and 2003).

In the 1980s, with the advent of garment industries in Bangladesh a new horizon for women was opened up. Previously migration was predominantly a male phenomenon but the job opportunities in new market factories for women changed the scenario



dramatically (Kabeer 2000). A great number of women started to migrate to urban centres with or without male guardians with the intent of finding jobs. Migration involves a great deal of risk and insecurity, cultural shocks, and emotional and ideological quagmires; however, in this study I found that in most cases women took the initiatives or persuaded their husbands to migrate. Although the urban centres in Bangladesh do not have jobs for all aspirants, nevertheless, options opened up for people in many other sectors, some of which are rather unconventional ones for women, for instance, construction work. Both male and female construction workers were predominantly migrants from rural areas. In the late 1980s and early 1990s the construction sector started drawing on female workers and since then the number of female workers in this sector has persistently increased. Women who take up construction work often do so due to the lack of other favourable options available to them given their socioeconomic and class positions. Construction work is physically very demanding, it incurs the risk of permanent physical wounds and premature aging, and also offers very limited opportunities to female workers both in terms of remuneration and vertical mobility compared to their male counterparts, as women predominantly work as casual labourers.

In Bangladesh, in general, the number of people in the labour market is increasing disproportionately without a corresponding increase in the demand for new labourers. Most of the people engaged in the construction sector therefore routinely face uncertainty regarding the availability of work each morning that they congregate at the points to seek work. This is particularly the case for female construction workers as they generally do not have recognised specialisation in any field of construction and thus can be replaced with new workers rather more easily. Furthermore, female construction workers cannot indiscriminately accept all job offers as they are constrained by their gendered identity and therefore vulnerable to different forms of exploitation and deprivation. In construction women earn a little more and they perceive it to be more liberating than domestic work, which is virtually the only alternative open to most of them. Construction work requires them to work in difficult situations, in adverse weather, and for long hours, depending on the demand of the recruiters, as work hours are not clearly defined. Furthermore, construction sites are renowned for being hazardous to the physical well-being of workers. In Bangladesh, few health and safety measures are in place for the protection of construction workers. Indeed, protective

work gear is conspicuously absent: typically, workers are bare-footed or in flip-flops, and without safety helmets, face masks, gloves and so on. Moreover, many female workers wear inconvenient clothing such as *sarees*, rendering them further vulnerable to injury (Choudhury 2013).

Notwithstanding these downsides, employment in the construction sector appears to be a lucrative alternative for many poor women due to the fact that it does not necessarily require any academic qualification or prior experience and thus the entry to and exit from to this sector is relatively easy. Migration to a new social context also facilitates women's take up of such jobs as they are somewhat released from the levels of social disapproval they would otherwise receive from their relatives and acquaintances back home in their villages (Choudhury 2013). In addition to these relative advantages of construction work, there is another important reason for people, particularly women, to join this sector. People already in the city – often women themselves - who are the initial contacts, often acting as a catalyst for women's migration, are a form of embodied infrastructure (Clisby and Holdsworth 2014). In this sense they become an essential living, organic bridge that facilitates women's rural-urban routes in addition to the material infrastructure of roads, housing, transport etc that all migrants need to make the journey. The women and men who form this embodied infrastructure play a key catalytic role in facilitating migrant women's access to construction work.

Yet, in the context of Bangladesh it is not easy for women to make the decision to join a heavily male dominated sector like construction as it is not considered an appropriate form of paid labour for women. Although women who join construction work, or who intend to do so, are located at the poorest strata of the society and have restricted or no access to the 'patriarchal bargain', married women generally face formidable constraints from husbands about joining such work. The husbands of these women, while themselves unable or unwilling to discharge their breadwinning responsibilities, seem reluctant to allow their wives to take paid employment in the public domain. By and large, husbands consider wives' waged work in the public sphere as a threat to long-established male authority in the home and also emasculating as it overtly exhibits men's failure to keep their wives in the home. In this study, I found, however, that husbands' prolonged inability to provide for their family, to some extent, tipped the

negotiation process in favour of wives in decisions as to whether or not they join the labour force.

Women's paid employment in construction has brought them into the public sphere and made them visible in wider society. Their mobility has increased to a great extent which has enabled them to create social networks outside their family or kin circles through which they come across new ideas, information, life skills and choices. In construction work they earn in cash and the contribution they make to their household economy is tangible, which in some cases can award them the sense of self-worth, confidence, self-esteem and greater decision making ability within the home. Access to an independent income confers them greater agency to deal with gender relations within the confines of home. Income earning abilities provide them a relatively stronger 'fallback' position and to some extent can facilitate their 'exit' from abusive relationships. On many occasions women are able to decide whether to remarry or remain single, whether to have a child and when to have a child. Relying on the 'patriarchal bargain' was perceived as impractical by many of my female participants, which also manifests women's increased awareness about their own capability and self-esteem. Entry into the labour force and the struggle of survival in competing fields equips female construction workers with diverse life skills ranging from using their sexual agency to draw on some benefits to resisting sexual harassment and other forms of oppression, utilising their ready wit, bravery or strength which also illustrate their ability to make rational choices, albeit in a very restricted sense of choice.

Although paid employment attributes women with many positive outcomes in different aspects of their lives, as mentioned earlier, it also exposes them to different situations that are perceived as exploitative in many ways. Rather than providing the necessary conditions for their emancipation, employment in construction simultaneously reinforces existing gender hierarchies both in the workplace and in the home. In the face of massive male unemployment, women are burdened with added responsibilities of earning incomes for the family, including husbands. As I said before, even in acute poverty men seem to be reluctant to allow their wives to join the labour market and once they do join the labour market, husbands, while enjoying the financial benefits, rarely acknowledge their wives' contributions. Since men in Bangladeshi society are customarily placed in a powerful position, women face constraints both in taking up paid

employment and in enjoying the rewards it offers. Studies conducted in different regions have demonstrated that patriarchy tends to be declining and it is linked with the decline of male breadwinners. Existing studies (e.g., Beynon 2002; Fuller 2000; Pineda 2000; Ehrenreich 1995) presume a negative association between women's paid work and unemployed men's masculine identity and also hold that unemployed men suffer intense feelings of 'disempowerment', 'emasculatation' and 'loss of self-esteem'. However, while men did express feelings of emasculatation if their wives worked in the construction sector, the dominant patriarchal relations that shape and organise the society maintain a cultural ambience where the hierarchical positions of men and women continue to persist. Women's tangible contribution and men's corresponding failure to emerge as reliable providers are not, as yet at least, appearing to pose a powerful challenge to patriarchal relations; rather patriarchy continues to pervade. This does not mean, however, that we are not witnessing cracks appearing in the patriarchal façade.

In Bangladeshi society in order to be considered a 'real man', a man needs to earn an income and prove himself a capable provider; lack of this ability tends to create anxiety among men and they feel inadequate. The inability of men to fulfil their breadwinning responsibilities and their dependence on wives can lead them to enforce more authority in the home to uphold and reassert their masculine identity. Lacking any 'proper' means that can help them to restore their self-esteem and their image of a 'real man', men in the poorer households often opt for the effortless option of dominating women to uphold their masculine identity in the public eye (see Pyke 1996). Men's awareness of their wives' increasing skills and capability both in the social and economic domain causes further disappointment and the sense of being challenged, which eventually leads them to exert patriarchal control in the home rigidly. A great number of women are involved in paid employment, their dependence on men has reduced to a considerable extent, and in poorer households men's provider role has been eroded significantly. Nevertheless a corresponding level of reduction in patriarchal control in the home has not been visible. Women are still seen to do the 'double shift'. Women's 'main' responsibilities of the household have diminished only marginally, if at all, while their role as earners has increased extensively.

I found that the husbands' role in the household transformed only slightly and most of them appeared to stick to the prevailing patriarchal authoritarian ideology. While a good number of participant men whose wives were not involved in paid employment outside the home expressed some openness to the idea of shifts in gender role-relations in the home, husbands who were completely dependent on their wives were more reluctant to share housework and embrace egalitarian ideologies as they thought it would more evidently portray their failure to emerge as a 'man'. It would be wrong to infer that only men strictly adhere to long-established gender roles in the domestic sphere. Even in a context where women are the sole breadwinners, it is the case that both men and women hold such deeply rooted notions of gender-appropriate tasks that it would be unrealistic to think that the society is on the immediate cusp of major transformations to its norms of patriarchal dominance. Social structure and cultural values provide men with the authority in Bangladeshi society, and in most households men control the income earned by their wives while women have no straightforward access to their husbands' incomes. Income under male control not only obscures the actual contribution of women and enables men (and women) to conceal men's failure to meet cultural gendered expectations, according to Blumberg (1991), it also poses a barrier to women's exercise of power within the home.

In this study I found that in most cases married women have restricted power to influence choices regarding whether they take paid employment, establish control over their own income, mingle with people freely, resist domestic violence boldly, and exercise their own agency overtly. This erosion of the male income and women's subsequent forced participation in the labour market to generate an income for the whole family, including the husband, has not automatically reduced male domination. Rather men tend to argue that their wives' contribution in the household economy is not a noteworthy one as globally men routinely make the greatest financial contribution and do not receive any 'special' recognition. This attitude clearly fails to identify that the ubiquity of man's 'special' recognition is so pervasive that it has become the mundane. They also fail to acknowledge that when women 'subvert' this patriarchal bargain, the price women pay is further overt deference and subordination as well as additional workloads as they solely shoulder the productive and reproductive household labour, not to mention their community management roles. Nevertheless, women only occasionally overtly resist male domination and challenge men's superior status or

make claims for the levels of respect in the household usually associated with the breadwinner role. Rather, social structures and cultural values lead women to justify men's behaviour and uphold men's masculine image.

Thus, when women become the main breadwinners, this increased visible economic contribution does not tend to be perceived positively either by family members or wider society. Husbands often complained that wives were not as subservient as they were before they started working and as such husbands demanded even more care and attention from their wives. Comments of my participants revealed that husbands become more vigilant about their wives' movement and behaviour when wives are more equipped with skills and information. Instead of appreciating wives for their contributions to the household, husbands were seen to criticise them and use offensive language towards them. In most cases husbands perceived that it is the women's wifely duty to earn for their husbands and family members, which resulted in the creation of a group of parasitic husbands who were reluctant to work once their wives started earning. Moreover, earning ability was seen to expose wives to domestic violence. Women experience multi-faceted exploitation in such situations as husbands neither recognise their contribution nor respect them for their sacrifice and hard work. Husbands were seen to call their wives names and in some cases label them as "prostitutes" as they work with male co-workers in the construction sector. In Bangladeshi society such levels of insolence shown by husbands do not remain confined within the home, rather this often spreads among the neighbours and acquaintances which brings women more humiliation and disgrace.

Female construction workers in this study are aware of gender inequality, husbands' dominance, exploitation and unequal domestic power in the home but they do not appear to overtly challenge it. This is partially because of their strong inculcation into patriarchal cultural practices and partially because of the 'perceived interest response' (Sen 1990) that performing all familial responsibilities, including earning a living for the family, will earn them the reputation of 'good women' both at familial and societal levels. Furthermore, the rationale of the participant women to enter into the labour market was to support themselves, their family, and specifically their children. Their entry into paid employment did not emanate from their quest for emancipation or economic autonomy; in fact, it was acute financial need that pressed them to take on

paid employment. I contest that these circumstances contribute to women's lesser inclination to question male authority in the home. Challenging male authority overtly and vehemently in a highly patriarchal context also means disrupting the conjugal relationship, which women rarely want to do. Women's weak fallback position resulting from the normative expectations of society, lack of social security and the stigma attached to divorce and desertion obliges them not to destabilise the marital bond even when it is abusive and/or exploitative.

In the workplace female construction workers are segregated along gender lines and concentrated only in a few stereotypical unskilled 'female jobs', such as earth cutting, brick breaking, carrying loads and so on which bring small financial rewards in comparison to other 'skilled' work done by their male co-workers in this sector. Women's vertical mobility is virtually closed because of their gendered identity as it emerged from the accounts of my participants that society is not accustomed to seeing women in the position of *rajmistri* (head construction worker) and accordingly would find it hard to believe that a female worker can have the skills of a *rajmistri*. This reflects society's deeply entrenched patriarchal bias, which continues to prevail. Women, although believing that they can learn so called 'skills', also tend to conform to the society's belief that it is a serious infringement of norms on the part of women to have the aspiration to take 'men's place'. While male construction workers are aware that women can learn the skills of a *rajmistri*, they clandestinely discourage women from doing so – or from displaying these skills - either giving the excuse of society's non-acceptance or directly mocking women workers for having the desire to become a 'man' by learning 'masculine' skills.

Male construction workers, in general, do not possess a very high opinion of their female co-workers both in terms of their working capacity and reputation as 'good women'. Women routinely experience offensive behaviour, verbal and physical abuse, strict patriarchal control on construction sites, and different forms of deception and exploitation, all of which their male co-workers seldom face. Although many of the male construction workers are sympathetic to the plight of their female co-workers, most of them perceive construction work as a wrong choice for women. Unmarried male construction workers are highly averse even to the idea of marrying a female construction worker, which manifests society's lack of recognition and the stigma

attached to low status work in male dominated fields. Female construction workers are seen by most of their male co-workers as non-conformist women who are invading male spaces and thereby unworthy of protection. Male participants supported women's employment only in acute economic need and wanted women to become involved only in stereotypical female jobs, such as teaching or working inside an office for privileged women, and domestic service for those less privileged. High levels of sexual harassment and sex related negotiations in the construction sector also bear testimony to the fact that a great majority of male construction workers continue to believe that women working in the public sphere are sexually available. Such perceptions of male co-workers not only expose female workers to offensive behaviour from other men involved in this sector, it also places them in a vulnerable position both in the home and wider society. Women, as construction workers, often face denigration from their husbands, neighbours and wider society because even the rumour of being involved in 'improper' sexual behaviour earns them disgrace in Bangladeshi society.

Equality between men and women appeared to be an absurd question to all my male participants and they even tended to consider it a contravention of divine law. The patriarchal belief in the higher status of men over women is so deeply embedded that women are also not immune from this sort of belief. Irrespective of their inability to provide for their family members and make important contributions to the household, society too continues to perpetuate the belief in men's and women's separate responsibilities in all spheres of life and expects women to conform to the cultural norms of passive, self-sacrificing, dependent and timid womanhood. This is, however, a myth, which is becoming increasingly unsustainable. In Bangladesh, there continues to be little public appreciation of women's work outside the home (Rahman 2010). Women routinely face structural constraints and paid employment exposes them to difficult situations both inside and outside the home.

However, this is not to conclude that women's visible economic contribution to the household economy and new roles in society do not bring any shift in wider social structures regarding women's rights, status and changing gender relations. Expansion of economic opportunities for women has been a key force for bringing change in different forms. Although social structures continuously constrain and shape individual's actions, individual's actions also have the potential to simultaneously reshape social structures



in many ways. This was found to be true in the case of female construction workers whose practices and actions have the capacity to influence gender transformations, at least to some extent, in the social structures. In Chapter VIII I presented specific instances of women thinking beyond the dominant role-relations of men and women assigned by the cultural norms of society. Women's access to an independent income helps them to challenge the existing model of the male breadwinner and transform the nature of the patriarchal control within the home, albeit to a limited extent. Although the participants often expressed their frustration over the inability of their husbands to provide for them, and about not being able to remain in the home/seclusion as they thought by working in a male dominated sphere they were violating the cultural norms of *pardah*, in no way does this imply their desire to forgo their new found economic autonomy. Women, in fact, enjoy their economic independence and independent mobility in the public domain. A great number of my participants appeared to be firm about their decision to continue with their work as long as they consider themselves able bodied. Work was identified as a way of life by the majority of women. They were reluctant to believe any verbal assurances about protection from men. However, women were seen to express frustration about the inability of their husbands to support the family and I argue that expressing frustration is a strategy on the part of the women by which they manipulate the situation within the households in their favour and clandestinely convey to men the message that they are unable to discharge their customary male responsibilities. This is believed to be a serious slight on men's false vanity of masculinity and it suggests that the phenomena of women's paid employment and husbands' dependence on wives has created a discernible dent in the value system that has hitherto effectively kept women acquiescent to the male authority within the house.

The debate as to whether women's paid employment acts as an empowering force for them or exposes them to further exploitation and deprivation is a central one in gender and development literature. In this study I present a mixed and more nuanced scenario. I observed some positive transformations in the notion of masculinities, femininities and gender relations as a response to women's integration into waged labour; which leads us toward optimistic prognoses about women's paid employment. However, women's multi-dimensional exploitation and deprivation in relation to paid employment both in the workplace and the household makes us sceptical and directs us towards a more

pessimistic conclusion. I argue that it is not possible to categorise women's experiences neatly within the emancipation/exploitation dichotomy. In the Bangladeshi socioeconomic and cultural context women's experiences as construction workers and the members of their respective households are so nuanced, complicated, uneven and smudged that it is difficult to define even individual participant's experiences simplistically as either empowering or exploitative.

Women engaged in poorly paid, physically exhausting jobs are forced in many ways to take up these jobs and obliged to continue in them which reinforces their vulnerability both in home and the workplace. Nevertheless, women's earning ability on some occasions eased their struggle in the domestic sphere and endowed them the confidence to negotiate their relations within marriage, break abusive marriages, and enabled them to make important decisions about 'strategically important' issues, such as marriage and having children. Women's new roles in family and wider society have also forced men to renegotiate gender relations in the home and change their perceptions about women's worth, at least to some extent, which is in itself radical in a society like Bangladesh. Men are increasingly growing accustomed to seeing women in more public realms which clearly has far-reaching impacts on social transformations. Paid employment has also acted as a catalyst for the formation of a sense of existence and identity of female construction workers. It has provided women a 'voice' that accords them the courage to resist sexual harassment, and complain about or condemn the harassers publicly. Women have started to recognise their own agency and are more able to exercise that agency in different forms both inside and outside the home. In the Bangladeshi context women's lives and well-being had usually tended to be in the shadow of their family's aspirations and well-being. However, this study revealed that women are no longer (if they were ever) 'cultural dopes' (Giddens 1979:52 cited in Kabeer 1991:133) - the passive agents who bear other people's pain, pleasure, success, failure, hopes and aspirations; rather women themselves have their own dreams and desires, and visions for the future as independent beings. Without attaching it either to their husbands or male children they now plan their future in their own ways, which illustrates women's agency and the erosion of the patriarchal bargain in a 'classic patriarchal context'.

Migration to urban centres and joining waged work enabled women to create wider social networks independent of family members and kin groups which boosted their

confidence. Women have themselves emerged as a form of ‘embodied infrastructure’ facilitating other women’s migration and settlement in Sylhet. Drawing on Kabeer (1991) I argue that neither do all women experience these positive changes in consistent ways nor that women have managed to surmount all cultural restraints and prevailing gender ideologies that persistently tend to circumscribe their options and determine their actions. Nevertheless, their actions and narratives are having a far-reaching influence on social structures, and transformations are taking place.

### **Future directions**

Findings from this ethnographic research indicate that transformations are taking place in constructions of masculinities, femininities and existing gender relations in contemporary Bangladesh. It would be interesting to examine more deeply the dynamics of the construction labour market, paying closer attention to the constraints women face to achieve vertical mobility and the ways that might remove these barriers to enhance women’s status in the construction sector. Can women be unionised in the construction sector to protect themselves from the exploitation of the employers and co-workers? Can women be successful as *rajmistris* if they are given necessary training? What happens if women achieve vertical mobility in the workplace? How does vertical mobility in the workplace influence gender relations both in the home and the workplace? How can policy intervention help construction workers to protect their rights? What can be done to ensure equal treatment of male and female workers? These issues need to be empirically investigated in order to develop a holistic understanding of the people engaged in the construction sector in Bangladesh with a view to addressing the problems they are experiencing and also to enlighten policy planners and development activists. This is beyond the scope of this study but remains important work yet to be done.

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