Migration, patriarchy and ‘modern’ Islam: views from left behind wives in rural northern Bangladesh

Marzana Kamal

School of Social Sciences, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, United Kingdom.

Contact: kamalm@hope.ac.uk

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Abstract

Male labour migration can both empower and disempower non-migrating, or left behind, wives – contingent on further distinctions of rural-urban, nuclear-extended households and of class, religion and educational background. Migration catalyses transformations in the gender and religious norms in rural northern Bangladesh. It entrenches patriarchal norms and helps to reinforce the practices of ‘modern’ Islam – by creating the identity of ‘respected’ housewife, a woman who stays home, takes care of her in-laws and wears the burqa՝ – that works within the codes of enhanced classic patriarchy*.* These patriarchal norms and practices dampen women’s agency through patriarchal codes – constituted of the power relations between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, restrictions on the physical autonomy of women and women’s dependency on their male kin. In-laws, and the assistance of natal kin, curtail women’s decision-making power. This curtailment serves, ultimately, to sustain the power the in-laws and natal kin exercise over the women.

Keywords: rural Bangladesh; modern Islam; migration; Muslim wives; burqa՝

# Introduction

Regional and religious diversity in gender norms, population and culture has long been a theme of South Asian scholarship. ‘Religiously informed cultural differences among Muslims’ (Jalal 2000, xv) require attention when studying and interpreting the life experiences of Muslim women in South Asia. Jeffery and Basu (1998, 4) urge caution against generalising the experiences of ‘the Muslim woman’ in South Asia because these differ by country (Muslim-majority or Muslim-minority), generational distinctions, the rural-urban divide, homemaking and occupational roles and the processes of religious reform. By exploring the experiences of married women who stay at home in rural Bangladesh when their husbands migrate for work – left behind wives – and reflecting on how these differ from those in other contexts or countries, this article attempts to stress that diverse reality. We might assume that these left behind women gain in authority – and the prevailing gender norms are challenged – in the absence of their husbands. But this assumption rests on notions about ‘female-headed households’ not substantiated in the context of rural northern Bangladesh. In reality, their natal kin and co-residing in-laws enforce the norms of female seclusion, and the women are particularly disempowered.

The quantitative research into the impact of men’s labour migration on their left behind wives in settings across Africa, Latin America and Asia is growing (Yabiku et al. 2010), but the data on left behind women in Bangladesh is limited. Few studies detail how the wives of migrants negotiate everyday life during the prolonged absence of their husbands in the patriarchal setting of rural northern Bangladesh (for exceptions, see Akram and Karim [2004] and Rashid [2013]). Some live with their in-laws; others live independently. Their experiences differ, and these must be considered separately. I emphasise why, and I highlight that the migration-related processes of Islamic reform compound the confined agency of the left behind wives.

Sylvia Chant (2003) attends to the dire predicaments of female-headed households in the Global South, where ‘there is no compensation for earning shortfalls through “transfer payments” from external parties such as the state or “absent father”’ (20). But she also valuably challenges the ‘blanket generalization’ of portraying female-headed households as the poorest (21). The category of female-headed households resonates with the situation of the left behind wives in rural Bangladesh, but it cannot be straightforwardly applied. Women live in patrilocal arrangements with their in-laws, who control the household resources. The absence of state support – and the normative approval of women’s dependency on male kin – discourage female headship of the household and, in the absence of their husbands, foster the reliance of women on the assistance of their extended family.

Classic patriarchy arises from the operations of the patrilocally extended household (Kandiyoti 1988). Its clearest example may be found in the geographical area that includes North Africa, the Muslim Middle East, and South and East Asia (Chowdhury 2009; Kandiyoti 1988). But even in patriarchal contexts women are not totally powerless or deprived of rights, influence or resources (Lerner 1989). Speaking to these core debates, this article explores women’s experiences at the intersection of classic patriarchy and their husbands’ migration. The circumstances of the left behind women push the boundaries of the category of female-headed households and highlight its porosity, internal diversity and limitations.

The literature shows that women’s decision-making power varies. Women are freer to make decisions in the absence of their husbands, findings from Middle Eastern and North African countries suggest (Ullah 2017). Women in rural Armenia and Guatemala do perform additional tasks, but neither the nature nor the scope of the tasks challenges the deeply rooted gender inequality (Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007). Men in rural Morocco resume their position as household heads when they return (de Haas and van Rooij 2010). The decision-making capacities of women in North India improved (Paris et al. 2005), but this decision-making capacity was not comprehensive (Jetly 1987): the women took decisions regarding daily subsistence, and the men made the major decisions – such as on the purchase and sale of land and on the expenditure on ceremonies.

Women living in nuclear families experience their husbands’ migration differently from those who live in joint families with their in-laws. The left behind women who live apart from their in-laws in India and Nepal experience greater agency and responsibility (Desai and Banerji 2008; Gartaula et al. 2012). The decision-making power shifts from men to women among nuclear families in a Punjabi village in Pakistan (Rahat 1990). The responsibilities of Gulf wives in Kerala, India increase when they live apart from their in-laws (Zachariah et al. 2001). In Nepal, on the other hand, women who live with their in-laws are often offered help, and household workloads are shared (Gartaula et al. 2012).

Studies on Bangladesh reflect this diversity of findings. The absence of men improves the ability of women to exercise power in the household, finds an ethnographic study of a transnational migrant community at a village in Sylhet (Gardner 1998). Left behind wives gain in decision-making power, suggests Hadi (2001), though the study does not make clear if in their extended households they would still be able to retain significance, exercise agency and make decisions for themselves or their households. The experience of agency varies when wives live with their extended family. Women’s security and living standards improve when their husbands migrate, but both natal families and in-laws exert stronger control (Akram and Karim 2004). The living arrangements of left behind wives determine their decision-making capacities, finds a study in two villages in Comilla district (Rashid 2013). The diversity of these findings signals the need to examine the agency of wives more closely to understand the dynamics of their relationships with in-laws and natal families.

Sarah White (1992) argues that women in Bangladesh pursue ‘centrality’ within their families rather than female ‘autonomy’. Women may pursue centrality in the household, and in their relationships with in-laws and natal kin. And they may acquire gendered power through their identity of ‘respected’ housewife, catalysed by the migration of their husbands and the improved status of the household. But that power may be diminished by the restrictions on physical autonomy imposed by natal families and, if co-residing with them, in-laws. Women’s agency leads to empowerment when it questions, challenges or changes regressive norms and institutions that perpetuate their subordination (Kabeer 2008). Agency is contingent on life circumstances and indeterminable variables, however, and defining and measuring it can be complex. This article attempts to illustrate that the left behind women in rural northern Bangladesh lack agency.

A cognate branch of the literature focuses on migration-linked social transformation, religious ‘modernity’ and upward social and economic mobility at the migrants’ place of origin. Drinking alcohol at expensive bars and wearing branded clothes became essential features in the formation of new identities for South Indian Christian return migrants (Osella and Osella 2000, 122). Bangladeshi Muslim return migrants are more likely to engage in acts of piety – prayer, style of dress and charitable contributions to mosques and madrasas (Kibria 2008, 520; Rao and Hossain 2012, 424). ‘Religious reformism is linked to the process of social mobility and claims to modernity; here “modern” derives from the styles and practices of wealthy Gulf states’ (Gardner and Osella 2003, xvi). Women in wealthier migrant or return migrant households tend be in stricter purdah than women in poorer, non-migrant households, Gardner (1998) notes in her ethnography of a village in northeast Bangladesh. Secular-liberal representations of Islam oppress women, according to Mahmood (2005), and Hussein (2018) suggests that this stance calls for theorising religious agency. However, my field material illustrates that wearing Islamic clothing – the burqa՝ – does not necessarily provide the wives of migrants with agency.

The literature on migration acknowledges that migration to the Gulf has induced Islamisation in Bangladesh (Gardner and Osella 2003; Kibria 2008; Siddiqi 2006; Hussain 2010). But more research is needed into the nuances of this transition process, and it should focus on gender norms. Mies (1986) coined the term ‘housewifization’ to indicate that society defines women as housewives dependent for their sustenance on their husband’s income; Debnath and Selim (2009, 137) claim that men’s labour migration from Bangladesh has recreated housewifisation. Migrant families in rural Bangladesh favour the identity of the ‘modern’ Muslim housewife. I analyse this identity, and its implications for women, by conjoining the perspectives of the studies on left behind wives – and on migration and religious reform – in my ethnography. I examine how in-laws and natal families impose the norms of female seclusion on women even more strictly in the absence of their husbands. I investigate the meanings of the emerging Islamic ‘modernity’ in practices such as wearing the burqa՝. I draw on my fieldwork to explore how – contrary to some expectations – men’s labour migration both maintains and intensifies local patriarchal norms and, simultaneously, facilitates the interpretation of ‘modern’ Islam in ways that curb the agency of their wives.

The literature on gender and migration focuses on the life experience of women migrants. This article is concerned with the influence of male labour migration on the experiences of their left behind wives. Gender norms that restrict rural women’s freedom of movement are emerging in the context of men’s migration. When a man migrates, his wife is subject to her mother-in-law’s supervision, and she must rely on the male members of the family. She is encouraged to adopt the burqa՝ as a sign of modernity and respectability – but not as a facilitator for freedom of movement. My empirical data reveal this robust inter-relation between male labour migration and their wives’ subordinate status. The recent scholarship on Bangladesh shows that strong support from the state and civil society has empowered women, but it does not focus on the absence of agency among married women in rural areas or the wives of migrants. By claiming that male labour migration reinforces village norms and Islamic modernity, which restrict women’s advancement, this article contributes towards filling this research gap. By focusing on patriarchal norms, religious ‘modernity’ and women’s lack of agency, this article contributes to the literature on gender and migration.

# The study locations: an overview

In the autumn of 2017, I collected accounts of the everyday life experiences of migrants’ wives using semi-structured interviews and through participant observation. To understand the current state of affairs in the villages, I also interviewed (without a voice recorder) local non-migrant families and local political/governmental authorities (known as *member* in the villages). I had informal conversations with villagers, and I wrote down my field observations and notes on the core themes in my field diary. I conducted my interviews in four remote villages in Kundogram Union in the Bogura district of northern Bangladesh. Bogura is 165 kilometres (km) from Dhaka, the capital, about a five-hour bus ride away. It takes another 40-minute taxi ride to reach Kundogram Union. Bogura city is an industrial city, and it has many small and mid-size industrial firms, but the villages where I conducted my fieldwork are agriculture based. The main income source in Bogura is agriculture. Bogura district has an average number of migrant households, according to the data of the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (2019); Comilla has the largest number and hill tract district Bandarban the smallest. Most of the research on labour migration and gender in Bangladesh has focused on migration-intensive areas like Comilla. But studying a less migration-intensive area, such as Bogura, can enrich our understanding of the diverse impacts of migration on sending areas; for example, it can shed light on contexts in which the practices of migrant households have not become normative and where migrant households are outliers rather than the majority.

The four villages lie a kilometre to one-and-a-half kilometres apart. Three of the villages have an all-Muslim population; except one village, Hindu para. Hindu parais the least developed. It has mud houses and no sanitary facilities or concrete roads, and only two men have migrated recently. Two of the Muslim-majority villages have mosques and adjacent *maktab*s(a religious school adjacent to the mosque*).* Only one village has a formal, non-religious government school. There are formal boarding madrasahs, but in a town in a distant sub-district – not in the study villages. Most migrant families send their children there.

It is common for men who own land to work on their own fields. Many other men are landless and they are agricultural labourers. Those not working in the fields are labour migrants in the Middle East. My research participants are mostly from poor and lower middle-class households; a few are from marginally better off households. Successful return male migrants invest their money in land, new houses or new businesses (poultry farms and fisheries). Economically successful households tend to have multiple generations of migrant men (father and son) or more than one migrant man (two brothers).

None of the womenin these villages – whether of migrant or non-migrant households – is involved in income-generating activities. They do not have bank accounts. A migrant man typically remits money to his father or, if his father is dead, to his brother, and the father or brother is solely in charge of receiving money and distributing it; the wife has no access to, or control over, financial resources. Sathi(27)[[1]](#footnote-1) was the only exception, because her mother-in-law was dead and her elderly father-in-law depended on her for food and other daily necessities. The lack of control over their husbands’ remittances reflects their co-residency with their in-laws. In my study villages women are discouraged from living alone, and so they could not assume headship of the household.

To situate the gender conservatism of the study villages within the larger context of the changing gender structures in Bangladesh, it is important to recognise that rural settings differ from the existing depictions of women working in factories or nongovernmental organisations in urban areas (Hussein 2019). And these villages are politically conservative and a stronghold of the Islamist party Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, though the government representative for these villages is a follower of the ruling Awami League. A middle-aged woman from a non-migrant household described the current government as being anti-Islam or an enemy of Islam (*Islam-er dushmaan*). A local Islamist leader (*hujur*) visits regularly and attracts thousands of men and women. Praising him, the woman said that the hujur encourages women to stay home and maintain purdah.

The main specificity in my study is that these are narratives of women whose husbands live abroad or have lived abroad for a long time. Both migrant and non-migrant households marry their daughters off early, and few women study or work after marriage; so, the experiences of women are likely to be similar. I did observe a few non-migrant families as part of participant observation, but I interviewed the left behind women, not the women of non-migrant families. The brides of migrants are expected to move in with their in-laws, like the new brides in non-migrant families, and live with them while their husbands live and work abroad. The authority of in-laws and natal kin grows stronger in the absence of their husbands and intensifies the pressure on the left behind women.

# Local patriarchal norms

## The prevailing power structure between mothers and daughters-in-law: the life cycle of left behind wives

The status of women in the family, and the shifts in their power over the life cycle, are covered quite widely in the literature on South Asian societies (Das Gupta 1995; Mason 1986; Cain et al. 1979; Chowdhury 2009; Kandiyoti 1988). The new bride is depicted as being powerless while her mother-in-law exercises considerable domestic control over her and other women (Mason 1986). Such cyclical power between two generations of women has been reinforced in the context of men’s migration; we may even need to attend to the structural power relations between two generations of women whose husbands are absent for prolonged periods. An example is Nehera Khatun (40), a left behind wife during the initial years of her marriage. Her eldest son, a labour migrant, is married to Yesmin (25). Nehera proudly explained that when she was young, she served her in-laws; now she deserves and demands the same from Yesmin. She claims it is her daughter-in-law’s duty to serve her in-laws. This includes cooking, cleaning and always obeying the in-laws and taking care of them.

Older women gain status and autonomy in the household by exercising power over the younger married women (Das Gupta et al. 2003). The status of mother-in-law is powerful, and it may suggest some agency for women. ‘Women strategize within a set of concrete constraints to maximise security and optimise life options in the face of oppressions’, suggests Kandiyoti (1988, 274) in her classic work on patriarchal bargains. Resolving difficulties with her mother-in-law is particularly challenging for a woman because her husband is absent and cannot negotiate or mediate. A young daughter-in-law, thus, looks forward to the days when she becomes the mother-in-law and can exercise power over the other women in the household. Indeed, Jeffery (1996) cautions against the blanket celebration of women’s agency in the household because in the context of classic patriarchy older women can use their increased power to undermine younger women. This problematic, yet influential, status of the mother-in-law continues to be celebrated in the context of men’s labour migration. However, there are traces of contestation from young brides. Yesmin, for instance, is discontent with being a submissive daughter-in-law. She claims her parents made a mistake in marrying her off early; she would not repeat the mistake with her own daughter when she reaches puberty but wait longer or even postpone marriage proposals.

The mothers-in-law interrupted my interviews with the young wives in several instances, as during my interview with Sumayia (22). When I asked her how she spends her free time, her mother-in-law said that she is not ‘that kind of woman’ (*ei bou shei bou loi*); she is of ‘good character’ and does not even chat with the women in the neighbourhood. When the mother-in-law left the room, Sumayia spoke of her dissatisfaction. The money her migrant husband sends goes directly to her in-laws; she receives nothing. And she has barely any right to speak on household matters; even her husband needs his parents’ permission to make any decision. Nehera, like Sumayia’s mother-in-law, spoke for her daughter-in-law and herself:

We women (*meye manūsh)* do not go anywhere! Market is not a place we should go. Since my husband (Yesmin’s father-in-law) returned from Saudi, he now goes and brings everything for us. When he was not here, my younger son used to go out for us. Women should always stay inside of the house. It is a sin (*pᾱp) f*or women to be outside.

Even in families where the mothers-in-law did not seem to hold such conservative values, daughters-in-law were expected not to move around alone; their in-laws always escorted them on their shopping trips to town or to attend to other necessities.

The experiences of Yesmin and Sumayia, and their relationship with their mothers-in-law, demonstrate particular vulnerabilities that intensified in the absence of their husbands. Nehera made explicit her expectations of Yesmin, and Sumaiya’s mother-in-law spoke to her ‘modest’ character. That shows the power these women exercise over their daughters-in-law. The authority of mothers-in-law may appear universal in much of rural South Asia, but in migrant families in rural northern Bangladesh women justify the exercise of power over their daughters-in-law in the name of ‘protection’ in the absence of their sons. And they regularly cross the fine line between ‘protection’ and ‘control’.

## The concept of ‘good women’ (valo meye): limited physical autonomy

In rural northern Bangladesh, the onus of maintaining the status of a respectable ‘good woman’ (*valo meye)* is heightened for women after marriage. Women who step outdoors by themselves risk losing their status and identity of ‘respected woman’ (*vodro mohila)*. Sen (1999) argued, in late colonial Bengal, any physical mobility and involvement in employment outside the home shoved women from their established moral role of mother and wife to that of the prostitute who was an outsider. The ideology that the space outside the home is for ‘loose women’ continues to resonate in these study villages;a *beporda meye* (a woman who does not maintain purdah) is a *bᾱje meye* (a bad woman). The concept of the ‘bad woman’ was related to the shame or dishonour that could be brought by women who eloped for marriage or did not maintain purdah (wear the burqa՝or hijāb, not be loud in public and limit contact with males other than close family members as much as possible). It would be acceptable for women to go outdoors if chaperoned by their husbands but, in their absence, the pressure to secure ‘respected feminine status’ is heightened and made more complex. When I asked Nurzahan (23) of Harvanga village if she ever went out alone, she said:

No, I don’t go out alone. Don’t you understand? My husband stays abroad, so people can be easily judgemental about me! They can say, ‘Oh, that migrant man’s wife roams outside alone’. I have to be careful for my own sake!

People in the villages can be curious about the personal life of left behind wives; so, they stay home as much as possible to avoid being exposed to local men, and their in-laws impose restrictions even more strongly. Whenever Sathi needs to withdraw money from the bank, her father-in-law escorts her despite his frailty, because according to Sathi the bank (in a distant town) is considered a long way from home, and the neighbours and villagers would frown upon her travelling that long a distance alone.

## Reliance on male family members

A woman traveling by herself would damage the family’s reputation; and so left behind women depend on the non-migrant male members of their family for daily necessities. Classic research argues that few women in rural Bangladesh have direct control over the means of production or other social and economic resources, and they must seek security through their husbands, sons or other male kin (Cain 1978). Kabeer (1997) points out a striking feature of gender subordination: women rely on men for protection as much as for provision, and women’s dependency on their male natal kin increases when husbands and fathers are absent.

In rural Bangladesh, almost all couples begin life together as part of a joint family headed by the man’s parents (Amin 1998, 207). One can assume that the young brides rely on their male in-laws for support. Interestingly, however, my data show that left behind wives rely more on natal male support even if they live with their in-laws. Some complications may arise in these circumstances: findings from India suggest that the overt involvement of a wife’s natal kin, especially that of her mother, may destabilise her marriage (Grover 2009), and that proximity does not guarantee that the support of natal kin will materialise or be genuine (Chaudhry 2019).

Most of the left behind wives who participated in my study emphasised the role of their male natal kin; the role of their female natal kin was somewhat obscure. This is so partly because it is unusual for married women to visit their natal home often to meet their mothers and unmarried sisters; the male natal kin visit the women more frequently, such as when they need help in the absence of their husband or father-in-law. Women’s relationships with their brothers or other natal male kin are culturally celebrated, and the relationships are stronger when women’s husbands are working abroad. Left behind wives, whether young or middle-aged, all acknowledged the support of their male natal kin. For Labiba (18), whose father and husband were both labour migrants, a paternal uncle (*chacha*) was the father figure who ensured that her needs (daily groceries, shopping for clothes) were met. The uncle arranged Labiba’s marriage. Halima (40), too, said, ‘My brother is like my father.’ Her brother always made sure she does not have to travel alone to shop for groceries. The left behind wives appreciate the support because it sends their in-laws the message that their natal male kin still value them and will side with them if a problem arises with their in-laws or in the absence of their husbands. This is the key difference between women’s experience of the support of their natal male kin and that of a male member of their in-laws’ family. The women did not feel repressed by the support of their male natal kin, but it is clear that their reliance develops in their kinsmen a strong degree of authority. This authority may or may not be problematic, but it deepens because the husband is absent.

If a woman marries a close relative or close by, the support of natal kin is stronger. Most of the participants in my study married into a village nearby; the farthest village was four kilometres away. Halima’s brother lives two-and-a-half kilometres away and visits her weekly to deliver the groceries on the day of thehaat(farmers’ market). In rural North India some Muslim women marry an easy walk away (Jeffery et al. 1988); close natal ties in Muslim communities ensure women family support (Jejeebhoy and Sathar 2001). Hindu marriages are arranged much farther away; married women are customarily treated as temporary members at their natal homes (Dube 1988). Two left behind women who participated in my study married their first cousins – both labour migrants – in the same village. Adori (24) of Harinmara village married next door; her husband, also her maternal uncle’s (*mama*) son, is a labour migrant in Saudi Arabia. Adori says, ‘Both my parents and in-laws thought because I don’t have any brother, if I marry my cousin, I can stay close to my parents and look after them.’ The parents and in-laws both assumed that marrying her cousin would let Adori live near her parents and take care of them. That challenges to some extent the traditional conception that only sons are capable of supporting parents. In Bangladesh, husbands and in-laws criticise women who want to look after their parents (Chowdhury 2009). It was possible for Adori because she married her cousin, and his family is bound to and compassionate towards her parents; from her in-laws’ perspective, the prior kinship relation made it acceptable for Adori, a left behind wife, to attend to her natal kin. The evidence from South India suggests that even close-kin endogamous marriage does not ensure that a woman has a good relationship with her in-laws (Vera-Sanso 1999), but in my study villages marriages between close kin have aided women in negotiating their relationships with in-laws. Adori helps her father-in-law in rearing their cattle (unlike the other daughters-in-law in the village). That may not have been possible if her father-in-law were not also her uncle.

Hadi (2001) claims that men’s migration has prompted ‘progressive’ change in gender norms in Bangladesh. The support of natal kin, and the practice of marriage between close kin, does help the women in my study village negotiate everyday life in their husbands’ absence. But this assistance is granted to enable the left behind wives to sustain their marriage in traditional ways and, ultimately, to safeguard the dominant status of the in-laws. Men’s labour migration increases women’s dependency on in-laws and natal kin. It strengthens patriarchal traditions such as cyclical power relations between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. And it leads to even stricter restrictions on their freedom of movement. In the villages I study, men’s labour migration does not challenge the inequitable gender norms.

# ‘Modern’ Islam

## The burqa՝

The norms of female seclusion prevail in my study villages, and so wearing the burqa*՝* is a matter of considerable importance to the women there. Bengali women have traditionally worn the Bengali dress, the sari, and covered their heads with one end of this dress, which symbolises purdah(Hussain 2010). Bengali Muslim women used to observe purdahlong before the burqa՝was introduced (Feldman and McCarthy 1983, 953). The burqa՝was first introduced in their fieldwork village, report Feldman and McCarthy (1983), when men brought it back from their haj(pilgrimage to Mecca) for the women of their family. Now, wearing the burqa՝has becomea new norm of respectability – the onus of respectability resting on women – and male migration part of an upward mobility strategy. As Gardner (1998, 203) rightly observes, ‘one way in which this respectability is expressed is through the behaviour of household women’.

All the 23 left behind wives said they wear the burqa՝when they are required to step out of their villages. It is often believed that wearing the burqa՝facilitates women’s autonomy. Alina (18), married to a Saudi labour migrant, said that when she is in a burqa՝ men on the street think twice before commenting on her body, but it did not help Asma (22) escape lewd comments or the male gaze. However, her husband is a labour migrant in South Korea, and her married status did help:

I started wearing [the] burqa՝long before my marriage. Even though I wore [the] burqa՝, men on the street used to pass bad comments on me. That is why girls in the villages are married off early. Married girls attract less unwanted attention from men.

Even in similar contexts, therefore, the safety felt while wearing the burqa՝differs from one woman to another. And a migrant’s wife feels additional responsibility to wear the burqa՝ outdoors: Nurzahan (23) said she wears the burqa՝so that her neighbours cannot say ‘Look, her husband is abroad and she steps out without [her] burqa՝.’

Maintaining purdahby wearing the burqa՝ is not essential for the women who work for cash (Amin 1996; Hussain 2010). Many poor women cannot afford a burqa՝, and performing physical labour in one is inconvenient. Middle-class left behind wives wear the burqa՝as a token of dignity and status – of ‘respectable’, ‘modern’ Muslim women – and to differentiate themselves from workers in the garments sector, maid servants and other working-class women (Rozario 2006; Hussain 2010). Gardner (1998), too, finds that women in migrants’ households observe purdah strictly. The identity of the ‘modern’ Muslim woman is merely that of a housewife who stays at home and takes care of her in-laws; this religious ‘modernity’ does not offer the women in my study villages educational or economic opportunities. Thus, male migration reinforces the patriarchal norms of the village in the name of Islamic ‘modernity’.

The left behind wives in my study, though from poor and lower-middle-class rural households, are well informed about the exploitative character of work in the garments sector for women, the sexual harassment of female labour migrants and the community’s low regard for manual jobs. They desire social status, not an independent life, because that would mean earning a livelihood and risking humiliation and the loss of social respect. They feel that being married and maintaining purdah is the way to achieve respectability. When their husbands migrate and their economic condition improves, wearing the burqa՝lets them project their new status and identity of a ‘modern’ Muslim housewife (in addition to their religious reason for wearing the burqa՝*)*. Migrant families project modernity also by buying new cutlery and fancy furniture and building houses.

The reason for wearing the burqa՝ differs by person and context. The left behind wives wear the burqa՝ to demonstrate ‘modesty’ when outdoors. Married women are expected to travel in the company of other family members even when wearing the burqa՝. This is unlikely for the wives of labour migrants in the crowded setting of suburban Bangladesh, where the burqa՝truly facilitates female mobility (Kamal 2020). The left behind women in the villages rarely leave home; they wear the burqa՝ to signal their identity of ‘respected’ and ‘modern’ Muslim wife. It must be said that this article does not claim that physical autonomy empowers women; it simply highlights the everyday life experiences of left behind women in rural northern Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh, gender-selective labour migration causes Islamic ‘modernity’, and it needs to be studied further. The left behind women become part of more ‘modern’ social arrangements, but that ‘modernity’ can reduce their agency. Male migration confers respectability on women. Wearing the burqa՝ and restricting autonomy manifests that respectability. Labour migration can improve a household’s financial status, but it also curbs women’s agency.

# Discussion

I have shown that men’s labour migration reinforces the local patriarchal norms in rural northern Bangladesh and enables the practices of ‘modern’ Islam. In combination, these two elements of social change do not advance women’s agency. Later in life, however, when wives become mothers-in-law, their status is enhanced somewhat, and they gain some authority in the household.

It is important to de-exceptionalise the limited physical autonomy of Muslim women in South Asia. The patriarchal practice of controlling the physical autonomy of young wives is not unique to the Muslim-majority villages of Bangladesh or Pakistan; it is universal in South Asia. Muslim women in parts of India and Pakistan, and across rural and urban areas, are assumed to have less autonomy than Hindu women, but Jejeebhoy and Sathar (2001) find little support for that assumption. At an urban Hindu village in South Delhi, India, mothers-in-law speak passionately in favour of the seclusion of young married women, particularly their daughters-in-law (Govinda 2013).

But unlike in the urban villages of India, where ‘women are challenging [the] conventional codes of marriage’ (Govinda 2013, 7), in rural northern Bangladesh the left behind wives are not able to challenge the patriarchal structure and its explicit expectation that they practise the norms of seclusion. In the absence of migrant husbands and fathers, women’s dependence on their male natal kin intensifies and offers men a dominant status and the responsibility to protect them. ‘Protection’ in South Asia involves ‘not only ensuring a woman’s physical security, but also curtailing her freedom, restricting or monitoring her mobility, and ensuring her chastity’ (Strohl 2019, 35). Girls are married off at an early age. Early marriage recreates the conventional power relation with their mothers-in-law. A left behind wife becomes, in turn, the mother-in-law of another left behind wife. Men’s migration does not contest the patrilocal residence pattern in villages, and this power structure continues.

The practice of wearing the burqa՝forms – in part – the identity of the ‘modern’ Muslim woman; but it rarely improves their physical autonomy, because society discourages women from traveling outside the village by themselves. In Morocco, modernist Islam and changing norms allow left behind women in rural areas to complete their education and then marry (de Haas and van Rooij 2010). This is not the case in rural Bangladesh, at least in my study villages. Early marriage and patriarchal social structures continue to dominate and, in the context of men’s migration, create the identity of a ‘respected’ Muslim housewife. The public display of religiosity, particularly wearing the burqa՝, constitutes the practice of ‘modern’ Islam in my study villages. My findings echo those in the research on left behind women in Guatemala (Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007) and in North India (Jetly 1987), which report that their decision-making power is inadequate. The natal families, especially their male members, support the left behind women even when they live with their in-laws. The assistance limits their agency and autonomy just as much as their in-laws’ restrictions, but it lets the women maintain their status of ‘respected’ wife, and they do not deem such support overly authoritarian.

The identity of the ‘modern’ Muslim wife created in the milieu of men’s migration does not empower women, I argue, because it does not provide them the agency of exercising their rights and questioning the unequal social norms in the village. On the other hand, the women themselves identify their own interest with the advancement of the household as a whole (White 1992); and they may desire the identity of the ‘modern’ Muslim wife because the price of economic and physical agency is the loss of honour. But the gain in agency is limited, and so one must be cautious in celebrating the identity of the ‘modern’ Muslim housewife.

I have shown that ‘modern’ Islam is a powerful agent in reconstructing housewifisation in rural Bangladesh in the context of men’s labour migration. Furthermore, this paper signals the need to rethink ‘modern’ Islam. The term ‘modern’ is not intended to generalise what modernity involves (Gardner and Osella 2003, xii); for migrants and their community identity, ‘modernity’ and the practice of ‘modern’ Islam involve both an emphasis on the brotherhood of Islam and a denial of what they consider ‘Western values’ (Watkins 2003). Women’s education, employment and freedom of movement are considered ‘westernised’ and ‘un-Islamic’ in my study villages; and the villagers signal their ‘respectability’ by limiting these. The notion of the ‘respected Muslim woman’ in the Gulf countries greatly influences the migrants; when they return, they convey the identity of the ‘respected Muslim housewife’ they desire to their wives and daughters.

I studied the everyday life of the wives of migrants in communities where the culture is patriarchal and ‘modern’ Islam emerges. I show that the agency and decision-making power of these women is curtailed by male migration, the associated affluence of households, the inroads of religious reform and their co-residence with in-laws and reliance on natal male support. On the other hand, these also give the women the identity and status of ‘respected’ housewife, an identity the women themselves may seek, because challenging the identity would contradict the village norms. Equally, wearing the burqa՝as a sign of practising ‘modern’ Islam is associated more with the notion of 'respected' femininity than with freedom of movement. ‘Modern’ Islam underpins the existing patriarchy to create for the left behind women the identity of a Muslim wife both ‘respected’ and ‘modern’. This identity vilifies activities outside the home, promotes female ‘modesty’ and reinforces the lifelong dependency of women on their male kin; it does not, thus, help the women. In the light of the previous research, this article also reminds us that the experiences of left behind women diverge along the rural-urban, class-education and religious-piety distinctions.

The research on Bangladesh or South Asia already links Gulf migration to Islamisation, but the implications of migration on gender norms need to be studied further. By exploring the influence of male migration on the identity of Muslim women in rural northern Bangladesh, and by attempting to broaden the understanding of their life experience during the prolonged absence of their husbands, this article adds to the literature.

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1. This article uses pseudonyms to protect the identities of the respondents. The numbers in brackets refer to respondents’ ages. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)