Negotiated Survival: Male Out-Migration and 'The Challenges and Coping Strategies' of Wives' Left Behind in Rural Bangladesh

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Abstract: Male out-migration from Bangladesh is a remarkable phenomenon for almost four decades. Labor migrants shift from rural residences to gulf states with an aim to search better employment option, leaving the members of their households behind. This paper particularly focuses on the challenges faced by the left-behind wives and their coping strategies in absence of their migrant husbands. The study is qualitative in nature that gathered information using In-depth interview among 25 respondents, accompanying focus group discussions. Based on the feminist viewpoint, the paper connotes that patriarchy as traditional social structure is the core influencing ingredient that brings challenges in every bit of life of the wives left-behind. The findings demonstrate that left behind wives in extended households confront challenges more than those in nuclear ones, in terms of practicing self- agency both in and outside the households. Good rapport with kin and community and employing new norms in regular life, function as coping strategies to overcome challenges.
Key words: Male out-migration, left-behind wives, patriarchy, challenges, coping strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

Being a hugely labor surplus country, Bangladesh has been participating in the supply side of global market (RMMRU,2007). Especially, since 1980s, large scale out-migration by men in labor sector has become a common phenomenon of Bangladesh (Farid et. al, 2009). Among total migrants from Bangladesh, 97% are men (BMET, 2008). The statistics demonstrates the very traditional feature that men have the responsibility to win bread. Apart from being considered as a means of supporting survival, male out-migration has value, both in economic and social development area. However, it leaves serious consequences in the place of origin where the members of the households are left behind by the migrant men. Absence of migrant men in left-behind households means women are likely to shoulder the responsibilities of their husbands, along with roles in domestic space. Usually, in rural areas of Bangladesh where patriarchal norms are more acute than urban centers (Kabeer, 1988), women are supposed to face difficulties due to husbands' absence. It is because, Bangladeshi rural households promote partnership of men and women based on highly specialized roles like men are valued for their ability to provide materially for a household while women are valued largely for maintaining household and rearing children (Balk, 1996). So, absence of men creates gap in roles and responsibilities of a household and thus provides women with extra burden.

Since household and kinship relations in Bangladesh are created following patriarchal line, "with authority vested in the senior male household head" (Kabeer, ibid), inheritance is transferred through male line. Women have limited or no access to decision making on household affairs. Women's devalued status within the household is further reinforced by purdah norms (Kabeer, ibid) and strong patriarchal values (Amin, 1995) which restrict their mobility in public arena. Considering these realities of Bangladeshi rural society, it is easily perceived that the women left -behind rarely can exercise autonomy and develop self-agency in absence of their migrant husbands. Nevertheless, question gets arose at this point in regard with family pattern and patriarchy that have influence on left-behind wives' situation. Women's household partnership with their husbands may take a pause for a long or temporary period but this partnership may exist with other left-behind household-members (Balk, ibid). Based on how much a woman is dependent directly on kin relationship, the reorganization of family unit into nuclear or extended pattern with new household heads takes place (Yabiku, Agadjanian and Sevoyan, 2010). Following these facts, the paper aims to dissect the challenges the left-behind wives face

personally, socially, psychologically, and in family and community. Also, it tries to scrutinize the strategies that women adopt to combat the challenges.

II. JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

Government of Bangladesh ratified the 1990 UN Convention on the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (ICMW) without reservation (Siddiqui and Fara, 2012). ICMW asserts that "Every migrant worker and every member of his or her family shall have the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law." Though the Convention mostly deals with welfare of the migrant men, it is far yet to be implemented for securing well-being of those living in left-behind households. So, it became necessary and expedient to reflect the Convention in the national legislation so that the difficulties faced by left-behind members can be investigated. Unfortunately, though research concerns are increasing in terms of out-migration, the scope for it has not been received much attention yet (DRC on Migration, Globalization and Poverty, 2009). Migration reflects significant socio-cultural impacts in the place of origin. It becomes the main avenue or passage of upward socio-economic mobility for the left-behind community (Massey et.al, 1993 cited in Stark, 1991). Feminist critiques argue that the assumption about social and financial benefit for all members in left-behind household is not accurate. It is because, here household has been seen as "a unit with a clear will, plans, strategies and aims" (Lienten and Nieuwenhuys, 1989) where all household members' contributions are not considered equally. Cortes (2007) rejects the idealized notion that households are unified entities in which left-behind members collaborate on equal basis for common interests. Rather, she thinks that members in left-behind households must have access to separate interests, rights, obligations and resources. Surely, assuming household as a monolithic and altruistic unit that takes unanimous decisions to advantage all group, is a defective one. This may hide intra-household power inequalities and largely ignores individual's influence and decision-making ability in left-behind households (Rodenburg, 1997 cited in De Hass and Van Rooij, 2010).

Major impact of male out-migration gets noticed in terms of recipient of remittances. Remittances secure better housing, household expenses and standard of living for the members of migrants' families in the place of origin (Roy and Nangia, 2005). Abadan-Unat (1977) found that left behind women, particularly in nuclear families enjoy greater decision-making power. Their interaction with organizations such as banks and Government agencies make a start that was impossible when their husbands were at home. On the contrary, women's autonomy in extended family gets controlled by the substitute authority like left-behind males or elderly females. (Desai and Banerji, 2008). While greater autonomy to some extent is a positive outcome for left-behind women, many problems are faced by them including additional burdens, increased workload, problems in childcare and debt dilemma (Datta and Mishra, 2011). Emotional and psychological strain in the absence of their husbands is much true in the case of younger wives left-behind (Thomas and Adhikary, 2012). Needless to say, the adjustments with left-behind condition are somehow difficult but women deliver highest efforts in this regard. Most of the migration researches have their attention towards women's decision-making capabilities and autonomy as prominent outcome of male out-migration. Though context-specific challenges faced by left-behind wives got place in few studies, focus on patriarchy and household pattern to understand the wives' real struggle is still an under-researched area. Drawing particular attention to the influence of patriarchy and household pattern, this paper reveals the challenges women face in different areas of life when their husbands migrate outside territory, and the coping strategies during this time-span.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

To obtain answer pertinent to research problems, this paper employed In-depth interview as prime data-collection technique. The in-depth interviews were conducted on 25 left-behind wives of migrant males. 13 of the participants were selected from nuclear households and the rest 12 from extended ones. Interviews were taken by the help of a semi-structured and open-ended interview guideline. Each interview took around 90 minutes. The targeted population were selected through snowball sampling from the place called Dohar – a sub-district of Greater Dhaka Division which is prominent for male out-migration. The villages of the sub-district are representatives of labor migration by men, mostly towards Gulf states like Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar. 2 FGD sessions were conducted to collect data from the kin group and community people to understand the actual reality of left-behind wives' lives. Moreover, 'Class' has been taken into the consideration to comprehend if it has role in treating different women in different ways. In rural areas of Bangladesh, class is mostly determined by wealth, status and ability to expend money. In the study, class has been marked on the basis of local insight. In accordance with respondents' views, the study fixed its focus on the middle class. The very local belief of the middle class in one hand is that they have neither authority on community matter nor vast wealth like community elites. On the other hand, they do not suffer from managing meals 2 times a day, necessary clothing, medical treatment and other basic amenities like poor people. As they belong to a position between elite and poor group, they consider themselves as middle class people.

Though In-depth interviews and FGD, as primary data collection techniques, helped the study to gather first-hand experiences of the targeted people, the study didn't sideline the necessity of taking assistance from secondary resources. Secondary sources sustained the study to capture the authenticity of the research-claim. Available literatures of national and international researchers, global statistics, relevant books, articles, reports and conference papers have significant donation in substantiating the goal of the study.

VI. RESULT ANALYSIS

Positive changes in left-behind wives' lives due to their husbands' absence is proved true in the existing literatures to a limited extent. Indeed, the positive upshots like lessening of domestic responsibilities, involvement in the income generating activities, increased mobilities or freedom from domestic violence manifests women's empowerment but these are not equally accessible for women from both the nuclear and extended households. Moreover, the assumption that women from nuclear families enjoy much freedom in absence of their husbands is not necessarily true always, if the patriarchal kin and community aren't still ready to allow women to be the chain-breaker. Certainly, myriad challenges are there towards survival of these women but their combating power lies in the strategies they adopt.

1.1   Challenges faced by left-behind wives and Coping Strategies to combat challenges
1.1.1   Purchasing grocery

Most of the participants admitted that purchasing grocery in the beginning of the month is their major concern. They try to make their survival safe for a long month by doing so. Even sometimes they exclude their necessities just to fulfill the needs of other members of the family. Women avoid to borrow money from neighbors thinking it may create problems in absence of their husbands. The reason behind why purchasing grocery items became top priority in monthly expenditure has been candidly confessed by a respondent -

"If I do not buy the grocery items after having money in hand, the money might be spent on other needs like clothing, invitation or treating guest. Then I could not ask for more money to my husband and of course, he will ask me about each field of expenditure if I am running out of money before the fixed time."

(Rabeya, a 35 years old informant in a nuclear household)

In spite of having control over remittances, women have to budget the household expenditures as per husbands' command from overseas. Moreover, women, mostly in extended households face restriction over outside mobility for purchasing goods, by their migrant husbands. In such a case, women have no option left other than taking help from in-laws which has been expressed by the following words-

"I feel annoyed to request my brother-in-law to buy grocery frequently over month. So, I list all what I need in the beginning of the month and get relaxed for the whole month. I do not prefer going to grocer's shop as my husband forbade me to do so."

(Shahana, a 24 years old informant in an extended household)

1.1.2   Maintaining good terms with in-laws to ensure security

Security is a significant concern for the left-behind wives. The study revealed that participants of the extended family rarely feel insecure in absence of their husbands. Contrarily, participants from nuclear households prefer residing nearby their in-laws' houses to ensure their safety. However, securing safe living environment is not the one and only reason of why the wives try to maintain healthy relationship with in-laws when their husbands live far away from home. The migrated husbands expect their wives to seek assistance regarding outside responsibilities and suggestions in crises periods, from the in-laws. Thus, the husbands want to prove themselves as obedient sons to the family, even from thousands of miles away. The left-behind wives make effort on safeguarding their reputation by meeting up their husbands' expectations. The fact has been manifested by one of the participant's words-

"Attachment with my in-laws helps me to have positive response during my crises periods. If I obey my husband's parents and help his siblings, my husband feels proud of me. So, I try my best to make my husband happy."

(Lipi, a 30 years old informant in an extended household)

Left behind wives try to contribute in in-laws' households financially, materially and by performing domestic responsibilities. They think their donations to the in-laws' households are reciprocal to the assistance they get from in-laws. An illustration regarding this point is as follow –

"My husband cannot stand by my side now. Anytime I may face problems regarding security, illness or purchasing things from outside. To cope with these aspects, I try to maintain strong network with my in-laws. I give my in-laws a hand on any occasion or necessity. I respect my husband's parents and provide pocket money to my younger brother-in-law as he purchases things for me from outside."

(Kulsum, a 30 years old informant in an extended household)

1.1.3   Attachment with neighbors

Wives in left-behind households depend on their neighbors, mostly, if their in-laws do not live in the same locality. In the nuclear households, women are seen receiving instant help from their neighbors when the in-laws and relatives live in remote locations. Dependance on neighbors make women feel secure socially and emotionally. Positive response in this regard was found from respondents –

"I have no relatives in the area where I am living. It is really difficult to dwell in a place without help of others, specially, while the head of the household is absent. That's why I build good network with my neighbors. My neighbors are helpful. They stand by my side when I go through crises. Just because of their support, I do not feel insecure and helpless in the community."

<div align="right">(Rabeya, a 35 years old informant in a nuclear household)</div>

In extended households, necessity of neighbors is felt in a different way. Sometimes, the left-behind women prefer to vent their stresses to like-minded people from neighborhood. Also, for some respondents, neighbors' houses are safer place to communicate freely with their husbands over phone –

"My mother-in-law stays in front of me when I talk to my husband over phone. It makes me feel awkward. Is it possible to share my secrets and emotions with my husband in the presence of my mother-in-law? To solve this problem, I go to my neighbor's house when my mother-in-law is not at home. I am lucky that my neighbors do not interrupt or keep an eye on me when I talk to my husband."

<div align="right">(Ranu, a 20 years old informant in an extended household)</div>

1.1.4.   Safeguarding own self from harassment

Transfer of public responsibilities to left-behind wives take place due to men's migration. Though men's migration opens the scope of increased mobility for women left behind, women can't exercise enough freedom in this aspect. Dealing with public domain is not always a trouble-free affair for women during husband's absence. Known or unknown male figures seek advantages due to such non-attendance of migrant males which has been demonstrated by this study. To shield their selves, participants of the study are found following the strategies like avoiding make up and adornment during their movement outside home, dressing themselves up with burqa (a long and loose garment to cover entire body, worn by Muslim women) and getting accompanied by children outside home. Some participants are found refraining themselves from adorning or doing make up as they think these things help express hidden beauty and make women attractive on the eyes of males. So, they voluntarily avoid prettifying them. The logic behind developing disinterest in adornment can easily be comprehensible by the following statement –

"If I go to any public place wearing make-up and jewelry, I may be a target of bad men. They may disturb me in my husband's absence. Then who will protect me? It is better to ensure my own protection by myself. Obviously, I like to beautify myself but I am alright with sacrificing my such fancy. I prioritize protection over looking pretty."

<div align="right">(Shubarna, a 30 years old informant in an extended household)</div>

To avoid any unwelcoming phenomenon outside home, many participants prefer dressing them up with burqa. Burqa is a safety wear to them against teasing by males –

"I wear burqa when I go to shopping mall, son's school or bank. Burqa saves me from male gaze. Since I use burqa, I become unnoticed to many. Thus, I feel relieved in my husband's absence."

<div align="right">(Asma, a 30 years old informant in a nuclear household)</div>

Getting accompanied by children, specifically by a male child, is a common practice among women left-behind when they have to perform any duties outside household. Such a strategy makes women feel safe during their movement in public domain-

"I get respect from any man when I am seen with my sons. My sons are better replacement of my husband as protectors. Nobody dares to throw any unpleasant comment or keep bad intention against me in presence of my sons."

<div align="right">(Salma, a 35 years old informant in a nuclear household)</div>

Seeking patriarchal protection by women has relevance in Bangladeshi context since they are vulnerable to violence both in domestic and public sphere. The strategies of the participants to safeguard themselves is truly the presentation of upholding the patriarchal values by the women in rural Bangladesh. The pathetic fact is, there most of the women nurture the values, even at the expense of exercising their own agency. Since patriarchal realm hands over the responsibility of protecting women from father to husband and sons, women feel safeguarded when they are accompanied by any of the mentioned male members of the family. Gendered socialization in patriarchal setting incites women's thought to be evaluated following the tradition. As a result, they cannot change themselves in spite of having full opportunity of exercising agency in absence of their husbands. Lack of husbands' presence encourage them to depend on their sons as their protectors, no matter how young or old the sons are.

1.1.5. Coping with victimization of violence by known people

Susceptibility of violent action by known faces from left-behind household and community, stimulates women to develop their tolerance power. The study discovered that teen-aged or young wives are prime target of sexual assault when their husbands are far away from them. They experience victimization of sexually provocative verbal and physical violence by the known perpetrators. The respondents think that objection against or discussion about violent attitude of their known figures cannot be solved by any intervention by family. Instead, they might have to encounter victimization for the second time being socially stigmatized. Experience of one of the left-behind young wives appeared as the evidence of patriarchal influence in this regard –

"One of my brothers-in-law hums at me, deliver bad signs and comments towards me and tries to touch me when nobody is home. I have lodged complaint to my husband but he did not pay attention to the matter. Instead, he suggested me not to make it an issue. He thinks if I discuss it with others, people will laugh at me and harmony within family would be broken down. Since then, I found it effective to lock myself in my room when there is nobody at home."

(Ranu, a 20 years old informant in an extended family)

Fear of stigmatization ensures silence of the victims of violence within household. The so-called protectors- husbands try to maintain the patriarchal standard by ensuring harmony within family at the cost of wives' victimization of violence. As a result, women have nothing to do but tolerating unpleasant comments or treatments and keeping themselves locked in their own rooms. Undoubtedly, these strategies are output of women's gendered upbringing fed by patriarchy.

1.1.6. Mitigating communication barrier

Communicating with husbands is found as a struggle for the participants of the study. Participants from the nuclear households have unlimited scope to call their husbands over phone. It is commonplace that their husbands call up almost every day. In contrast, participants from the extended households face difficulty in terms of communicating with their husbands. Some wives in left-behind households do not have access to mobile phone as it is strongly restricted by in-laws. In such circumstances, the left-behind wives prefer visiting the neighbors' places, frequently, to contact with their husbands over phone. Particularly, they choose to go to neighbors' places when their in-laws do not stay at home or sleep during day time. Many participants pick late night as calling hour to avoid vigilant eyes of their in-laws –

"My mother-in-law suspects whether I discuss family matters or defame my in-laws to her son. That is why I reply in 'yes' or 'no' if my husband calls me up at day time. I give him a missed call at late night. It is the perfect time while all are in deep sleep and I can communicate with my husband without any barrier."

(Shubarna, a 30 years old informant in an extended household)

1.1.7. Overcoming loneliness and psychological distress

Loneliness and psychological distress of wives are rarely acknowledged in the left-behind households. The women miss their old days that involves visiting the places of entertainment like cinema or fair and spending quality times with their husbands by face-to-face conversation. These moment-making components are hard to be created in absence of their husbands. To cope with the lonely feeling, these women try to keep them busy with different interests during their leisure hours. Engaging themselves in income generating activities like sewing, watching Bangla movies or dramas and playing with children are some sources that lessen their discomfort during the period of isolation. Spiritual executions play a significant role in the participant's lives to attain peace to a certain degree. Some participants think that the regular prayers and recitation from the holy scriptures make them feel calm. However, the study has explored a surprising fact related to this strategy. The participants don't willingly engage themselves in religious practices every time. For many, praying regularly on time and reciting holy scriptures routinely are commanded by their husbands which they are obliged to perform for their husbands' contentment –

"My husband thinks I may fall in bad company or trap as he is not staying beside me now. So, he wants me to be on right track during his absence. He guides me to pray 5 times a day and recite Qur'an when I feel depressed and lonely."

(Mukta, a 24 years old informant in a nuclear family)

As relieving forces, technological amusement and religious practices may help diminish loneliness or psychological ache for certain moments but these forces cannot act as support like husband's company. Moreover, all strategies to cope with emotional anguish are not the participant's own creation but husbands' guidance to keep them away from bad involvements. Religious applications are, obviously, the best way to attain mental serenity but such applications sometimes work as a mode to achieve the goal of patriarchy, being imposed on women.

1.1.8.   Managing children single handedly

Gendered socialization connects women with responsibilities of child caring. Also, socialization process in patriarchal setting instructs women to be compromising, loving-caring, soft-spoken, kind-hearted and the followers of commands. As women are highly demotivated with regards to be raised with male traits in rural areas, it is hard for women to control their children in a commanding way, just like their husbands perform. In the study, the participants are found with the thought that their husbands could manage their children better by the means of beating or scolding when necessary. Thus, they appreciate the gendered quality of men to dominate others that has been legitimated by patriarchy. Fetching children from school and buying them snacks or packaged food requires women's movement outside home which is controlled by family and community to a great degree. Restriction on such mobility gets validated by patriarchy. Patriarchy determines public place as male domain where women have lesser access. Patriarchal forces like in-laws' reluctance or fear of victimization of violence are solid reason behind women's inaccessible existence to male domain –

"It is not possible for me to go to grocer's shop at any time to fulfill my kids' demand that their father used to manage. My in-laws do not prefer women to go outside on regular basis for buying snacks for kids. That's why I serve my kids with homemade snacks mostly since their father migrated."

(Helena, a 26 years old participant in an extended family)

1.1.9.   Fulfilling own preferences

Participants from extended households often face discrimination in terms of fulfilling their preferences in some provisions like cooking their favorite foods or having necessary life stuffs –

"I cook for the whole family but I cannot provide the head of big fish or chicken-breast or chicken-leg piece on my son's plate"

(Rehana, a 36 years old informant in an extended household)

Extended household represents strong patriarchal control over women in absence of their husbands. It is because, the male heads of households still exist. In such sphere, it is difficult for women to manage their likings for themselves and their children as well. Tolerating discrimination to ensure harmony within the households is a coping strategy for some participants while others save a little chunk of remittance sent by their husbands, to spend on their favorite stuffs.

VII.   DISCUSSION

In a patriarchal social setting, male out-migration places the left-behind wives in a burdensome situation. Since patriarchal socialization promotes women to comprehend 'men are superior to women', women's dependence on men becomes commonplace. Ordinary assumption indicates that husbands' absence due to migration leaves a scope for women to lessen this dependence. However, expansion of women's opportunity in household and community level gets challenged by traditional social structure built on the base of patriarchy. Changes that appear in the lives of left-behind women do not ends up at positive upshot always. To cope with the difficulties, they adopt coping strategies, all of which are not entirely the creations by these women. Kin groups, community networks and even the migrant husbands have influence on the coping strategies that women adopt.

From the perspective of intersectionality, this study addresses pattern of household as a category of discrimination against women left-behind. Considering the pattern of household matters in scrutinizing patriarchal control over women. The study reveals that a nuclear household is an open domain to exercise freedom and dignity than that in extended ones. Nuclear households take a female-headed appearance in absence of migrant males whereas control of male head remains the same in extended households. The left behind wives in extended households can exercise their agency and have the benefit of scopes only if the households lack a male-head. The study signifies that husbands' migration cannot ultimately be an occasion to liberate the left-behind wives from the control of patriarchy, no matter they belong to a nuclear household or an extended one. Household is the smallest representative unit of patriarchal structure that has its relation to community. The groups in community (relatives, neighbors or acquaintances) play a decisive role in influencing women's dignity, freedom and choices. Seeking guidance or suggestion from migrant husbands, in-laws, relatives or neighbors legitimates the notion that women are dependent sex.

Changes of left-behind women justifies the concept of "renegotiation of expectations, behaviors and relationships" (Matsuoka and Sorenson, 1999). However, these renegotiations have subtle relation to patriarchy. Women compromise with their expectations, behaviors and relationships to ensure security, dependency and reputation within patriarchal domain. Good relationships and networking with in-laws, relatives and neighbors get prioritized by the women to cope with the crises in absence of their migrant husbands. Husbands' migration increases the outside mobility of women but such mobility has association with their dependent attitude to some extent. In many cases they get accompanied by the kin groups or community figures who act as substitutes of the migrant husbands. In fact, absence of self-esteem in women, obviously, results from their socialization

which is well formulated by the patriarchal ideology. Through interiorizing patriarchy, the women become what Mirkin (1984) terms as "mental slaves". Moreover, the study consciously captured that the coping strategies adopted by the left-behind women is a pure demonstration of legitimizing the influence of patriarchal institutions, agents, norms and values. Some of the coping strategies support the validity of patriarchy through the institution of religion and purda (veiling) while some strategies are evidenced as tool to preserve chastity.

VIII.   CONCLUSION

Difficulties in left-behind wives' lives are plenty in number that results from male out-migration abroad. The coping mechanism that women embrace to tackle the difficulties, reflect negotiation with relationships and surroundings. A left behind wife consciously follows the strategies to ensure security, reliance and privilege, even at the cost of sacrificing her expectations, necessitates and selfhood. In fine, wives in left-behind households have to comply with every patriarchal element, institutions, values, norms and practices. This process of negotiation acknowledges their survival in a patriarchal setting.

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