

## Livelihoods and Labeling of Rural Women in the Urban Slums in Bangladesh

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### Abstract

*Rural-urban migration is essentially an unavoidable livelihood diversification strategy for the poor women in many underdeveloped countries. The contribution of such strategies to the betterment of economic condition of migrant has been scrutinized and recognized and found sometimes inevitable. Of studying female migrants living in the slums in Dhaka city, the study is attempted to resolve the labeling issue of female before and after migration. Using a descriptive research design, the study finds that most of the female migrants are uneducated and young. Migration increases females' labor force participation and reduces their rate of unemployment significantly. The females who were unemployed in the rural areas find new label of occupations include housemaid, garment worker, services and daily labor in the urban area. Although female migrants encounter different forms of discriminations, expose to unhygienic and high risky living condition in the slum yet migration increases income at their disposal. They find migration as a tool of self identity and a strategy of empowerment. Thus, it can be strongly argued that since migration helps rural women's upliftment in their livelihood through economic betterment, therefore the policies suggested in this study may be applicable for the countries Bangladesh alike.*

**Key Words:** Migration, Female migrant, Slum, Label, Income

### Introduction

With 1237.51 persons per square kilometer, Bangladesh has the highest population-density among the large countries in the world. 28% and 72% of populations live in urban and rural areas, respectively. The rural-urban migration rate is 21.9 %<sup>1</sup>. Population growth rate has dropped at 1.37 in 2011. Ownership of land is heterogeneously distributed in all over the country. Land-man ratio is continually decreasing and estimated at 0.12 hectors which is the lowest in the world. Transformation of Bangladesh's agrarian economy to industrial structure; urban concentrated development strategies and urbanization increase market areas

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.dghs.gov.bd/licts\\_file/images/Health\\_Bulletin/HB2012\\_CH/HB2012\\_CH1\\_BD-at-a-glance.pdf](http://www.dghs.gov.bd/licts_file/images/Health_Bulletin/HB2012_CH/HB2012_CH1_BD-at-a-glance.pdf), accessed on 7<sup>th</sup> October, 2015.

for diversified products and influence the productivity of labor. Such multiple effects increase labor force participation and extend employment for the rural uneducated, landless and poor people.

High growth of population, reduction of arable land and decreasing agricultural productivity incur negative effect on living standard of rural population and accelerate rural poverty where female suffer more than male. Widows are treated badly and considered burden of household by the members of her parent household (Rabby, 2012). Female has limited access to markets, education and health facilities in rural Bangladesh. Scarce income opportunities lead their low level of endowment in the community (Rabby *et al.*, 2011a).

Rural women in Bangladesh are most prone to starvation and food insecurity since they engage into irregular, low-paying and physically strenuous daily wage labor activities (Rabby *et al.*, 2011b). Most of the work for women in rural Bangladesh is mostly confined into homestead as of cultural, religious and social restrictions. To overcome socio-economic ill-being, rural women are breaking the tradition, social norms and culture and assigning rural to urban migration. Though, internal migration has substantial contributions in improving the socio-economic conditions of household but yet to be acknowledged literally.

Migration induces livelihood diversification into off-farm and/or non-farm activities locally or in other localities. Along with the agricultural labor, the migrant herd also consists of –as Rogaly *et al.* (2002) finds- school students, farmers, petty traders and processors, priests. The incentives of migration for these different types of people differ greatly.

Traditionally migrants are young male labor which hints at the inception that migration may not be a suitable and effective livelihood opportunity for women, particularly in Bangladesh. Afsar (2005) reports that 75% of temporary, 50% of permanent and 33% of non-migrants of Dhaka City are 15 to 34 years of age. Among the migrants, female encounters fewer difficulties in finding employments in formal sectors (e.g., readymade garments, textile industries) in Bangladesh. Garments sector in Bangladesh has opened a new avenue for the female worker. Garment sector employed around 4.0 million workers (World Bank, 2014) of which 80% are female women who are mostly from poverty stricken and disadvantageous households (BGMEA, 2013). 90% female workers of garment factories are under 30 years of age (Rashid, 2013).

The magnitude of migration to jobs in the export garments industry is directly related to improvement of worker's households in rural areas (Paul-Majumder and Begum, 2000). Women commonly enter the export oriented garment sector for the reason of survival (Kibria, 1996). Without their remittances 80% of female household would slide below the poverty level (Paul-Majumder and Zohir, 1995).

Female migrants engage in construction works as a helper, digging mud, carrying bricks, sand, cement and other materials. They also find employment as part-time and full time housemaid in urban households. Neither Bangladesh Labor Act, 2006 nor Bangladesh Labor Act (Amendment), 2013 address the rights (e.g., working hour, wages etc.) incurred to female worker from the above mention sectors.

Migrants live in slums in Dhaka city are mainly worked as agricultural workers before migration (Afsar, *ibid*) but the employment of the same group of females after migration has not been explored by any of the studies reviewed above. And, along the line, how does such a risky livelihood strategy (i.e., rural to urban migration) incur new identity to the female migrants has yet to be studied.

Therefore, this study attempts to clarify the following objectives which are-

- (a) to draw the profile of female migrants;
- (b) to analyze female migrants' participation in both rural and urban labor market; and
- (c) to understand how does rural to urban migration incur new identity to the female migrants and the impact of new label on their livelihood.

## Research Design

### The study area and population

The korail slum with a population of 78,000<sup>2</sup> appears to be the largest slum in Dhaka Metropolitan area, hence this slum is selected for the study. Tentative target female population has been estimated and illustrated in the following Table 1.

Table 1: Estimated Tentative Population of the Study

Child (age between 0-14 years) population <sup>3</sup>	Adult population		Total population
	Female <sup>4</sup>	Male	
25740	26130	26130	78000

*Source: Estimated by author.*

### Research tools and data collection

This is a non-experimental descriptive study in nature. A semi-structured questionnaire is constructed and a code sheet is also developed. In line, a data base is prepared in SPSS 16.0 for Windows. Sample frame of the studied population cannot be made due to time and financial constraints. A sample of 153 respondents-female migrants is selected through using non-probability sampling method (convenience sample technique). Face to face interviews are conducted to collect data from the selected 153 female migrants in January, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> <http://bangladeshislums.weebly.com/korial-slum.html>, accessed on 8<sup>th</sup> October, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> In Bangladesh, 33% of populations are in between 0-14 years of ages (Source: Bangladesh Demographic Profile, 2013, CIA Factbook, Feb 21, 2013. [http://www.indexmundi.com/bangladesh/demographics\\_profile.html](http://www.indexmundi.com/bangladesh/demographics_profile.html), accessed on 4<sup>th</sup> October, 2015)

<sup>4</sup> 50% population of the Dhaka district including the city corporation are female. (Source: BBS, 2009; Bangladesh Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, 2009; Volume II: Dhaka Division)

## Results and discussion

Table 2: Profile of Female Migrants in Korail Slum, 2015

Concepts		Status of employment after migration				Total amount of migrant	
Variable	Indicator	No		Yes		Count	%
		Count	%	Count	%		
Education (YoS)	Uneducated (<1)	7	4.6	86	56.2	93	60.8
	Primary level(1-5)	7	4.6	36	23.5	43	24.1
	Secondary level (6-10)	3	2	14	9.2	17	11.1
Total		17	11.1	136	88.9	153	100
Age	<18	0	0	6	3.9	6	3.9
	18-23	6	3.9	15	9.8	21	13.7
	24-29	7	4.6	40	26.1	47	30.7
	30-35	1	0.7	39	25.5	40	26.1
	36-41	0	0	14	9.2	14	9.2
	42-47	2	1.3	10	6.5	12	7.8
	48-53	0	0	4	2.6	4	2.6
	>53	1	0.7	8	5.2	9	5.9
Total		17	11.1	136	88.9	153	100
Marital status	Married	16	10.5	107	69.9	123	80.4
	Unmarried	0	0	8	5.2	8	5.2
	Widow	1	0.7	9	5.9	10	6.5
	Divorced	0	0	1	0.7	1	0.7
	Separated	0	0	4	2.6	4	2.6
	Deserted	0	0	7	4.6	7	4.6
Total		17	11.1	136	88.9	153	100

Note: YoS-Years of schooling

Table 2 shows that demographically, female migrants are predominantly young. Among the migrants, around 74% are below 36 years of age. In economic point of view, 89% of females are engaged in employment after being migrated.

About 60% female migrants are uneducated and only 11% has secondary level of education.

The migrants herd consists of 80% married and 5.2% young unmarried female. The very low incidence of divorce (0.7%) does not reflect bondage of marriage since deserted (5%) and separated (3%) female are being suffered by the ill-tendency of their husbands. Of total, 11%

female migrants are not in the labor force being involved in home making activities. The three groups of female migrants that includes divorced, separated and deserted are the most vulnerable in economic, social, physiological, physical and even in sexual perspectives.

Table 3: Distribution of Household Size and Employment Status of Female Migrants in the Korial Slum, 2015

Variable		Status of employment											
		Before migration				Total		After migration				Total	
		No		Yes				No		Yes			
		A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
Household size	1	2	1.3	1	0.7	3	2.0	0	0	3	2.0	3	2.0
	2	5	3.3	5	3.3	10	6.5	1	0.7	9	5.9	10	6.5
	3	18	11.8	18	11.8	36	23.5	6	3.9	30	19.6	36	23.5
	4	20	13.1	20	13.1	40	26.1	7	4.6	33	21.6	40	26.1
	5	20	13.1	11	7.2	31	20.3	3	2.0	28	18.3	31	20.3
	6	9	5.9	6	3.9	15	9.8	0	0	15	9.8	15	9.8
	7	8	5.2	2	1.3	10	6.5	0	0	10	6.5	10	6.5
	8	4	2.6	1	0.7	5	3.3	0	0	5	3.3	5	3.3
	10	1	0.7	0	0	1	0.7	0	0	1	0.7	1	0.7
	11	1	0.7	0	0	1	0.7	0	0	1	0.7	1	0.7
13	1	0.7	0	0	1	0.7	0	0	1	0.7	1	0.7	
Total		89	58.2	64	41.8	153	100	17	11.1	136	88.9	153	100

Note: A-Frequency; B- Percentage (%)

Overall, 58% female migrants' household sizes are below national average<sup>5</sup> (Table 3). Female migrants from households of >8 and <2 member/s were either housewives or unemployed before migration. Migration assignment opens new economic avenue for the rural females. Proportion of unemployed female reduces from 58.2% to 11.1%, while employed female number increases from 41.8% to 88.9% after migration (Table 3).

### Label of female migrants: Before migration

Table 4 shows that 1.3% female involved in making garment (dress) at home before migration. The number of housemaid (0.7%) reflects that the least economic and social benefits incur from this type of laborious activity in the rural areas in Bangladesh. Working in community clinic may not be economically a rewarding job. Thus, it is difficult to anticipate future prospects of the occupation. These push factors induce rural female to inflate the crowd of rural to urban migrants.

<sup>5</sup> Average household size in Bangladesh is 4.4 (BBS, Population and Housing Census, Bangladesh at a glance, 2011)

Table 4: Distribution of Occupation Among Migrants in Korial Slum: Before Migration, 2015

Occupation	Frequency	Percent
Unemployed	89	58.2
Housewife	33	21.6
Shopkeeper	2	1.3
Non-agricultural daily labor	14	9.2
Agricultural daily labor	6	3.9
Working in community clinic	1	0.7
Making dress at home	2	1.3
Tailoring	5	3.3
Maid	1	0.7
Total	153	100.0

Female migrants mostly were unemployed (58%) in their original residing villages (Table 4). This may mean that lack of employment opportunities impede livelihood upliftment and influence rural to urban female migration. This finding implies the inevitability of formulating *in situ* development initiatives. Among other activities, 9.2% and 3.9% female migrants were engaged in daily laboring in non-agricultural activities and farming, respectively.

Females with skills and capital realize migration as a better livelihood strategy rather than involving in shopkeepery, tailoring and working in community clinics in the rural areas. Past experiences in working in garments factory induces further migration to urban industrial areas.

#### **Label of female migrants: After migration**

As the urban growth centers provide employment opportunities, all the unemployed female and many housewives become employed as garment worker and housemaid. The number of female migrants employed in garment (dress) making activities increases from 1.3% (Table 4) to 21.6% (Table 5) from before to after undertaking migration, respectively. The least attractive activity- housemaid becomes the most prosperous sub-sector of urban informal economy. Payment per activity; requirement of low skill; greater flexibility in case of time and duration and previous experience in own housekeeping make housemaid activity less burdensome relatively to other activities (e.g., garment worker). The urban informal sector assimilates female migrants very quickly into different spongy sub-sectors.

Table 5: Distribution of Occupation Among Migrants in Korial Slum: After Migration, 2015

Occupation	Frequency	Percent
Garments worker	33	21.6
Housemaid	83	54.2
Housewife	17	11.1
Small business	8	5.2
Service holder	3	2.0
Daily labor	6	3.9
Begging	3	2.0
Total	153	100.0

### Switching occupation

Since migration is a livelihood diversification strategy, it facilitates female migrants to engage into new employment in urban area. Therefore, an understanding of occupational switching is important to identifying the new labels of female migrant. The new label of rural female in the urban informal sector can be exposed from the occupational switching which is reported in the Table 6. Almost all the unemployed females of before migration find a new label of another occupation including small business, housemaid, garment worker, service and daily labor.

Table 6: Switching and Distribution of Occupation before and after Migration by the Female Migrants in Korial Slum, 2015

			Occupation of migrant after migration							Total	
			GW	HM	HW	SB	S	DL	BG		
Occupation of migrant before migration	UE	1	20.2	52.8	9.0	5.6	3.4	6.7	2.2	100.0	
		2	54.5	56.6	47.1	62.5	100.0	100.0	66.7	58.2	
		3	11.8	30.7	5.2	3.3	2.0	3.9	1.3	58.2	
	HW	1	21.2	60.6	18.2	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	100.0
		2	21.2	24.1	35.3	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	21.6
		3	4.6	13.1	3.9	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	21.6
	SK	1	50.0	50.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	100.0
		2	3.0	1.2	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	1.3
		3	0.7	0.7	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	1.3
	NADL	1	14.3	57.1	7.1	14.3	.0	.0	.0	7.1	100.0
		2	6.1	9.6	5.9	25.0	.0	.0	.0	33.3	9.2
		3	1.3	5.2	.7	1.3	.0	.0	.0	0.7	9.2

		Occupation of migrant after migration							Total
		GW	HM	HW	SB	S	DL	BG	
ADL	1	16.7	66.7	16.7	.0	.0	.0	.0	100.0
	2	3.0	4.8	5.9	.0	.0	.0	.0	3.9
	3	0.7	2.6	0.7	.0	.0	.0	.0	3.9
CCW	1	100.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	100.0
	2	3.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	0.7
	3	0.7	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	0.7
MDH	1	50.0	.0	50.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	100.0
	2	3.0	.0	5.9	.0	.0	.0	.0	1.3
	3	0.7	.0	0.7	.0	.0	.0	.0	1.3
TL	1	40.0	60.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	100.0
	2	6.1	3.6	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	3.3
	3	1.3	2.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	3.3
HM	1	.0	.0	.0	100.0	.0	.0	.0	100.0
	2	.0	.0	.0	12.5	.0	.0	.0	0.7
	3	.0	.0	.0	0.7	.0	.0	.0	0.7
Total	1	21.6	54.2	11.1	5.2	2.0	3.9	2.0	100.0
	2	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	3	21.6	54.2	11.1	5.2	2.0	3.9	2.0	100.0

Note: 1- % within Occupation of migrant before migration; 2- % within Occupation of migrant after migration; 3- % of Total; UE-Unemployed, HW-Housewives SK-Shopkeeper NADL- Non-agricultural daily labor, ADL- Agricultural daily labor, CCW-Community clinic worker, GW- Garments worker, MDH- Making dress at home, TL- Tailor, HM- Housemaid, SB- Small business, S- Service, DL- Daily Labor and BG-Beggar.

Table 6 shows that among the housewives (21.6%), 21.2% became garments worker, 60.6% became housemaid and the rest 18.2% held the same label even after undertaking migration.

Shopkeepers and tailors moved into housemaid and garment worker after migration. The daily labors did not hold same occupation rather move into both formal (e.g. garment worker) and informal (e.g., housemaid) labor market. The females who were housemaids before migration have become housewives after migration.

Begging became a new identity for some non-agricultural daily labor (7.1%) and unemployed (2.2%) who either may not have enough capital to uphold comparative advantages of assigning migration in a economic growth center or begging may generate a good amount of income with minimum effort thus attracts aged female migrants.



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### **Impact of labeling**

The consequence of job switching, unemployment rate before migration was 58.17% which reduces to 7.25% after migration (Table 3). Females of very small household size (e.g., <2) are the most vulnerable and have no other income support but to work for subsistence. On the other hand, large size of household forces the female member of households to involve income generation activities what she can to get her household run by.

With the new labels, overall, female gives to the labor market of Bangladesh a good impression through increasing labor force without deteriorating further unemployment rate of the economy. Explicit contributions of female migrants should be recognized since they have due involvement into garment sector, services and SME sector in the urban area. In line of contributing into informal sector, livelihood diversification strategy of assigning migration helps female migrants to accumulate capitals; become empowered; contribute in reducing poverty and livelihood improvement of the country all together.

### **Conclusion**

The livelihood challenges that cannot be overcome through adopting ex-ante coping strategies compel rural female to undertake migration and resort in the urban slums in Bangladesh. Current rate of rural to urban migration demonstrates that the on-going rural development policies are less effective to generate capital development avenues for the rural poor female. The female migrants mainly comprise the uneducated unemployed and housewives seeking employment in the spongy informal sector in urban area. They are predominantly young and married. The widow, deserted and separated female migrants are the most vulnerable in both economic and noneconomic aspects. Migration increases labor force participation and reduces unemployment rate of uneducated female migrants. The females who were unemployed in the rural areas find new label of occupations include housemaid, garment worker, services and daily labor. Migration does not only uplift the livelihood of female but also contribute in the economic development of Bangladesh through involvement into garment sector, services and SME sector in the urban area. At the same time, implicit contributions of rural female migrants to the urban informal sector (e.g., housemaid) provide facilitates to urban households to participate into labor market, reduce income erosion and help coping up with increasing expenditure of urban livelihood. The new labels of female migrants necessitate government should adopt capacity building strategies which would be effective to empower women, reduce multidimensional poverty and sustain livelihood. Availability of and accessibility to infrastructure facilities may rejuvenate rural economy and facilitate the development of economic growth centers in rural areas in Bangladesh. Policy priority should be emphasized on creation of *in situ* livelihood diversification activities. Pro-female 'Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises' should be promoted to create *in situ* employment opportunities. The policy makers must have field work experiences on livelihood problems of female migrants so that the suggested policies can be executed efficiently.

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