

# Research Report

International migration from Bangladesh to Italy:  
exploring the social impact on those left behind.

By Nicoletta Del Franco

Carried out under the project:

"Promoting safe migration and local development in four districts in Bangladesh through awareness raising, skills development and institutional capacity building."

MIGR/2008/153-614



**Terre des hommes Italia**

**Aiuto diretto all'infanzia in difficoltà**



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**A project co-financed by the European Union and  
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ISBN 978-984-33-2151-0

Nicoletta Del Franco

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Abstract

This study focuses on international migration from Bangladesh to Italy and explores the impact of this type of migration on those who are left or stay behind taking into account both economic and social dimensions. The field-research on which the study is based was conducted in Brahmanbaria Sadar upazila (sub-district) in the district of Brahmanbaria, Bangladesh, in November and December 2009. A qualitative methodology and a range of qualitative methods have been employed including participant observation, focus group discussions, conversations and informal interviews with members of migrant households, prospective migrants and staff of local NGOs. The study, drawing from the migrants and their families' perceptions and experiences, describes the migration patterns present in the research area and shows the link between migration to the Middle East and migration to Italy. It describes the socio-economic status of the migrant households, the costs of migration, the migrants' motivations and achievements. The study then considers some aspects of the impact of migration on the household members left behind. It looks in particular at access and control of remittances and at the impact of migration on women in terms of work-load, mobility, decision making power. The concluding section discusses the implications of the study for policy and future research and identifies some areas of intervention.

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## **International migration from Bangladesh to Italy: exploring the social impact on those left behind.**

This pilot study has two main aims: to explore aspects of the social risks and benefits of international labour migration from Bangladesh to Italy, and to identify potential areas of intervention that might help improve the social and economic situation of household members who are left or stay behind. The field research on which this study is based was conducted in Brahmanbaria Sadar upazila (sub-district) in the district of Brahmanbaria in November and December 2009. It forms part of a 3 year program entitled "*Promoting safe migration and local development in four districts in Bangladesh through awareness raising, skills development and institutional capacity building*". The project was co-financed by the European Union and implemented in Bangladesh by Terre des Hommes Italia in co-operation with WARBE Development Foundation (European Union Co-financed program Contract Number: MIGR/2008/153-614)<sup>1</sup>.

### **1. Background and key questions**

Bangladeshi people have a long history of migration since the pre-colonial times (Siddiqui, 2003). Nowadays people are moving both internally mostly from rural to urban areas (Afsar, 2000, 2003; Seeley and Gardner, 2007, Abrar and Seeley, 2009) and internationally mainly to the Middle East and South East Asia, but also to Western countries, among which the USA and the UK have been so far predominant (Gardner, 1995; Siddiqui, 2003; de Bruyn and Kuddus, 2005, Rashid, 2008). According to the statistics collected by BMET (Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training) on people who migrated through regular channels, 6,741,187 Bangladeshi migrated overseas between 1976 and 2009 (BMET, 2010). Remittances from overseas workers have been steadily increasing over the 1990s and the 2000s and in 2009 accounted for 10% of Bangladesh's economy. They were the second largest source of foreign income after ready-made garments (Reuters, 2010).

Migration to the USA, Canada and Australia and the UK in Europe is characterized by being long term and permanent. The latter started in the nineteenth century from the district of Sylhet and its history and characteristics distinguish it from the contemporary migration to other European countries (Gardner, 2007). From the 1970s, after Western countries adopted more restrictive immigration policies, Bangladeshi workers started moving to the Middle East and South East Asia for short-term labor contracts. Some countries in these areas are still today the preferred international destinations although, since 2000 the number of migrants has been decreasing from one year to another (World Bank, 2008; Siddiqui, 2003).

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank for their support Patrizia Gattoni and Laura Giani in Dhaka, for their help in data collection Talha Noor, Rupesh Ch. Paul and Tripti Rani Sarker, in Brahmanbaria, for comments on a draft of this report Prof. Ann Whitehead (University of Sussex, UK).

Short-term migrants from Bangladesh are predominantly men between the ages of 20 and 25. While in the early years there was a majority of skilled and professional workers, today the percentage of unskilled and semiskilled labor, with a low level of education, is higher. These workers migrate mainly through agencies and in response to adverts in the press (Zeitlyn, 2006; Siddiqui, 2003). In Europe, besides the UK, Bangladeshi migrate also to Germany, France, Switzerland, Belgium, Netherlands, Spain, Greece and Italy where according to ISTAT (the Italian government institute of statistics), the documented Bangladeshi were 65,529 in January 2009. According to the few studies available, migration to Italy, which has recently emerged as an important destination for Bangladeshi migrants, does not seem to have much in common with the oldest flows to the Middle East, the UK and the US (Knights, 1996; De Bryun and Kuddus, 2005; Siddiqui, 2003; Zeitlyn, 2006). While Knights (1996: 141-143) defines Bangladeshi who migrate to Europe as 'well educated risk takers', Zeitlyn observes that Southern Europe destinations attract an emerging middle-class with higher standards and aspirations, not interested in less prestigious and less remunerative older destinations like Saudi Arabia and Malaysia (Zeitlyn, 2006: 30-31).

The impetus to carry out research into the social costs of migration for those left behind developed from an initial concern with cases, observed by WARBE Development Foundation and Terre des Hommes Italia (TDH Italia) in Noria sub-district (Shariatpur district)<sup>2</sup>, of negative impacts of migration. They found households where wives of international migrants had lost contact with their spouses and left to look after the children with no means of subsistence, or situations where wives of migrant workers claimed that their children had suffered because of the lack of a paternal figure in the household. According to a field assessment carried out by WARBE and TDH Italia in 2008 in the 4 sub-districts where the project is implemented, some of the women left behind by their spouses also expressed feelings of insecurity and concerns about social disapproval. The same study also reports a few cases where migrants had remarried in the destination country and had de facto abandoned their wives and children in Bangladesh. (WARBE and TDH Italia, 2008) Research on migration has increasingly turned from studying the economic aspects of the impact of remittances to integrating this with a focus on the social and emotional aspects of the impact on those left behind (Toyota, Yeoh and Nguyen, 2007; Mazzucato and Schans, 2008). These same studies also stress that economic choices, such as those concerning the control and use of remittances, are best understood in relation to different socio-cultural contexts and to the social relations that regulate the division of labour and responsibilities, the reciprocal

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<sup>2</sup> 4 areas of intervention have been identified for the above mentioned program: Brahmanbaria Sadar upazila (sub-district) in the district of Brahmanbaria, Dohar upazila in Dhaka district, Gournadi upazila in Barisal district and Noria upazila in Shariatpur district.

obligations and claims between household members and wider social networks. In this regard, it is particularly important to explore the area of gender relations because of the ways migration may alter the division of labour between men and women, may change gender norms about roles and responsibilities and challenge the way gender relations are understood and talked about (in the case of Bangladesh, by drawing husbands, sons and fathers away from the household for long periods of time).

Research into international migration from Bangladesh has mirrored the wider literature by focusing mostly on the economic impact of remittances on the national economy and households, and predominantly on the flow of semi-skilled and un-skilled workers to Middle Eastern and Southern Asian countries (see for example: Siddiqui 2003; Sarma and Zaman 2009). A few studies have focused on the Bangladeshi community in Italy (Knights, 1996,1997; Harney, 2006) and on the geopolitical causes of Bangladeshi migration to Italy and Spain (Zeitlyn, 2006). Aspects of the social impact on the country of origin have been discussed by Gardner and Zahir (2006) who have looked at informal mechanisms of social protection in the context of a village in Syleth with a high level of transnational migration to the UK. Rashid (2007, 2008) has dealt with the impact of overseas migration to the Gulf, observing that young wives and older people left behind are particularly vulnerable to abandonment, especially when they belong to small, economically marginal households. Rashid (2007) emphasizes the diversity and heterogeneity of women's experiences and notes the different situation of women who, after their husbands migrate, live on their own, return to their parental house, or move in with the in-laws. Her research also shows how women are actively engaged in the migration of their husbands, brothers and sons and argues that they gain from that role a 'contested' authority. The Bangladeshi diaspora to the UK has been extensively studied by among others Gardner (1995, 2007). Among the literature that has dealt with migration in South Asia, it is worth mentioning here Osella and Osella's work on migration from the Indian state of Kerala to the Gulf, one of the key themes of which are changes in gender norms and ideas (C. Osella and F. Osella, 2006, 2007).

### ***Lessons from research on internal migration and its social impacts***

Unlike the literature on international migration, research on internal migration in Bangladesh has dealt more with the social impact of migration on those left behind. This literature revolves around three main issues: the impact on women, the effect on educational choices, and the functioning of social networks for social protection. The research shows that most wives and mothers of migrants, whether they belong to rich or poor households, tend to take on extra work and responsibilities (Afsar, 2003). Massey et al. (2009) also found that when men migrate, women's mobility and autonomy understood in terms of decision making and expansion of their social and economic activities, increase. There are however significant differences among women in different

stages in the life course: older women are less subject to limitations of mobility motivated by purdah<sup>3</sup> (Afsar, 2003) and young brides experience more negative aspects of autonomy and are often 'overburdened, physically insecure, with increased childcare, more obliged to be submissive to senior women' (Massey et al. 2009:1-2). Massey et al. (2009) also found that the impact of migration on women varies by class and socio-economic position of the household. Although modern technology allows greater communication between migrants and their families back home, quite often women are forced to take household decisions on a day-to-day basis (Seeley, 2007).

Other studies have explored the issue of whether and how migration is linked to education. Afsar (2003) for example found that one of the social benefits of migration is that migrants tend to invest more in their children's higher education than non-migrants, for a variety of reasons of which desire for social prestige is one. In contrast, other studies have found that young wives who stay behind have to employ their adolescent sons for those tasks that involve mobility and access to male domains, such as the bazaar or some agricultural chores, so that boys are removed from education. Education for boys ends up being perceived as less profitable than work. Interestingly Tariquzzaman and Hossain (2009) notice that since 2005 the national enrolment rate for higher education for boys is decreasing and suggest that this happens because boys' work has a higher return than education.

Another theme that emerges from this literature on the left behind is the role of informal networks of social protection. Massey et.al. (2009) show that in India women relied mostly on friends, kin and neighbours as providers of a kind of social protection called 'sahajho' (literally 'help' in Bengali). In Gaibandha (Bangladesh) the 'shalish'<sup>4</sup>, formed by influential rich men provided loan to women who stayed behind. Women could also count on the help of six local NGOs which provide micro-credit, health care and flood protection. It should be noted that while these social links can be a source of social protection, they may also carry certain social costs. Gardner and Zahir (2006), in particular, criticize approaches to informal mechanisms for social protection that 'do not situate local institutions of social protection within the wider political economies in which they are embedded' (Gardner and Zahir 2006: 4). They suggest they fail to engage with the system

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<sup>3</sup> Purdah, which literally means curtain, has not to be understood only in the limited meaning of the physical seclusion of women inside the house. Both for Hindu and Muslims purdah entails an ideal of modesty enforced through 'prohibition on movement, gesture, speech and association and the development of feminine characteristics like virtue and shame' (Ahmed 1993:60). Papanek argues that purdah operates through two different principles: 'separate worlds' and provision of 'symbolic shelter' (Papanek, 1982:6). The first is mostly related to the division of labour and a series of rules regarding the use of space. The second underlines the tension between the private domain pertaining to women and the outside world.

<sup>4</sup> Traditional informal village courts for the resolution of different kind of disputes, where prominent village leaders (matobars), usually men act as mediators.

of patron-client relationships where the help women may get from informal networks is always linked to some sort of reciprocity and hierarchy and, more importantly, to forms of power.

In view of the concerns raised by the NGOs involved in the project mentioned earlier and the themes that emerged from the literature, the field-work undertaken for this study was designed to explore quite broadly the experiences and perceptions of the migrants and their family members around the following questions:

- Who are those who migrate to Italy and who do they leave behind?
- How do migrants and left/stay behind evaluate the migration experience and what are their motivations and aspirations?
- What are the immediate economic impacts of migration on those left behind?
- Who has access to and can control remittances?
- What are the main problems and benefits for those left behind, especially the impact on women in terms of work-load, mobility, decision making power?
- What is the impact on gender norms?

The study is organized as follows:

Section 2 describes the fieldwork, field-site and methodology; section 3 describes the migration patterns and the socio-economic status of the households; section 4 looks at the experience of migration, and the migrants' motivations and achievements; section 5 focuses on the migration experience from the point of view of the left/stay behind; sections 6 contains some concluding remarks and policy recommendations.

## **2. Fieldwork, field-site and methodology**

I conducted most of the fieldwork over a period of two months (November -December 2009) in the urban area of Brahmanbaria Sadar and in 4 villages situated a few miles South-East, South-West, North-East and North-West of Brahmanbaria Sadar town. I used qualitative methods including participant observation, focus group discussions, conversations and informal interviews with members of migrant households<sup>5</sup>, prospective migrants, TDH Italia staff in Dhaka, WARBE central and local staff, and representatives of a local NGO. Two field officers employed by WARBE Development Foundation and a young man who had a previous experience of migration accompanied me during my visit to 27 households, some of which had been in previous contact with the WARBE Development Foundation local office. Most of the field data were collected through informal interviews and conversations with members of these households.

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<sup>5</sup> I use interchangeably the term household and family as comprising those who eat from the same kitchen. As we will see the extended family prevails among the migrant households considered in this study.

In many of the households we visited we were first received by some male members, usually one of the brothers or the father of the migrants. Normally the women would not come forward and men were our main interlocutors. Women would make themselves available to talk if I and the female field officer joined them in a different room but their responses seemed in these cases quite superficial. In some cases where the household head was a migrant or was dead or temporarily absent, we had long conversations with women, usually the older ones. We had also the opportunity to meet some of the migrants themselves who were in Bangladesh for EID holidays or for longer periods.

We were normally asked whether the project run by WARBE Development Foundation and TDH Italia included any interventions to support the migrants in Italy and my presence as an Italian who was able to speak Bengali triggered curiosity and questions, so that most of the conversations were far from formal. However because of the limited amount of time I spent in the area I only established a deeper relationship with members of some households that we visited more than once. The young man who accompanied us as a volunteer, also turned out a good source of information and introduced us to some of his young friends who were in the process of migrating.

We started off by visiting 4 families and located the other 23 through a snowball method. We managed to identify a few migration patterns that were well represented by the 27 households we met. Most of the migrants or prospective migrants to Europe we met or whose relatives we talked to are young men between 18 to 35 years old who moved to Italy 3 to 12 years ago. In every household we visited, we were told of some relatives who had migrated to Italy 20 to 25 years ago. These older migrants had all settled in Italy with their wives and children. Thus we met mainly younger migrants some of which were still unmarried. It must be noted that the 27 households we visited, with the exception of 5 (three of which have migrants only to the Middle East and 2 have members who migrated to Italy), come from a homogeneous and quite affluent socio-economic background. Thus, this limited sample doesn't represent all the socio-economic strata in the research site and the experience and the impact of migration as discussed in this study, assume characteristics that cannot be generalized to households who do not have the same economic and social resources. On the other hand, as argued by some of the studies quoted above, the more recent migration to Southern Europe seem to be mainly a 'middle class' phenomenon and, according to the findings of this study, the high costs of migrating to Italy in the area are largely beyond the social and economic capacity of the poor.

I have changed all the names of the people we interviewed and omitted from the case studies details that might compromise their anonymity. I have tabulated some basic information about each household visited in two tables in the Appendix. In the text I will refer to the household as numbered in the tables.

### ***The research site***

Brahmanbaria Sadar is one of the 8 **upazila** (sub-district) of Brahmanbaria District situated in central Eastern Bangladesh and part of the Chittagong Division. In order to understand the context in which migration to Europe takes place, it is important to consider some of the economic characteristics of the district and the broader area to which Brahmanbaria Sadar sub-district belongs. Three recent World Bank studies (Sharma and Zaman, 2009; Shilpi, 2008; World Bank, 2008) point out that there is a significant East/West divide in terms of economic growth and incidence of poverty in Bangladesh. This is due in part to the geographical characteristics of the country: the course of the two main rivers, the Ganges and the Brahmaputra split the country in three parts creating a natural border that divides the East where the two main industrial poles of Dhaka and Chittagong are located and the West. The three studies mentioned agree in saying that the Eastern region has greatly benefited from being integrated with Dhaka and Chittagong whereas the West and the South West in particular are much more isolated from the two important growth poles.

A spill-over effect from Dhaka district, that has had historically the lowest poverty incidence, has made the surrounding areas able to attract higher return economic activities resulting in large differences in the economic structure of the two regions (World Bank, 2008). The Eastern districts have easier access to bigger markets, are more developed from the point of view of infrastructure, such as electrification, and are less prone to natural disasters. The statistics account also for a comparatively bigger number of urban households engaged in non agricultural self-employment. It is evident that the largest decline in poverty levels occurred for Dhaka, Chittagong and Syleth divisions, whereas little change occurred in Barisal and Khulna divisions. Between the East and the West there is also a significant difference in terms of remittances received: while in Chittagong division (in the Eastern region) 24,2% of the households are receiving remittances from abroad in Khulna District they are only 3,9%. The percentage of remittances from domestic migration is however similar around 25% (World Bank, 2008:41). It has also been found that in households receiving remittances from abroad the incidence of poverty is 17% compared to 42%; while domestic remittances are received by both poor and rich households foreign remittances appear to go mostly to rich ones (World Bank, 2008).

Brahmanbaria Sadar belongs to the more prosperous Eastern region. According to the updated poverty maps obtained from HIES (Household Income and Expenditure Survey) 2005, (BBS, 2009) the incidence of poverty in Brahmanbaria Sadar *upazila* is low compared to other areas of Bangladesh, even if not amongst the lowest in the country: the percentage of population whose per-capita household expenditure is below the upper poverty line is between 20% and 36% more than 60% in the poorest *upazilas* and

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less than 20% in the richest) and the percentage of poor population is between 25% and 35% (more than 55% in the poorest *upazila* and less than 25% in the richest). The same maps show that the travel time to Dhaka, the capital city, is among the lowest and Brahmanbaria Sadar is well connected to both Dhaka and Chittagong. It is also among the 11 most urbanised sub-districts in the district, with about 1/4 of the population living in urban area.

The local market area in Brahmanbaria Sadar town is wide and offices and banks where remittances can be collected are everywhere. Both the urban and the rural areas are characterized by a fast changing scenario and buildings belonging to the more successful migrant families are appearing everywhere. The area around WARBE Development Foundation office is characterized by the presence of many little shoes manufacturing factories and shops. The members of some migrant households have established businesses in Dhaka. A further feature of development of the area is the presence of Titas Gas, one of the biggest extraction companies of the country that provides significant employment.

### **3. Migration patterns and the socio-economic background of the migrant households**

From Brahmanbaria Sadar sub-district people migrate to Europe, to the Middle East and to South East Asia. Some of my case studies show that migration to the Middle East and Europe are not exclusive. In 11 out of the 27 households I visited I found both types of migration. In 4 households it was clear that the fathers' migration to the Middle East helped to fund their sons' migration to Europe. In 7 families, some siblings were or had been working in Middle Eastern countries while others choose to move to Italy. Among the 27 families of my sample there are also 3 households whose members have migrated only to the Middle East and 13 other households whose members have migrated or are waiting to migrate exclusively to Europe (either Italy or Greece). In this section I use some case studies to describe and discuss the migration patterns I encountered and the socio-economic status of the households that engage in each of them. It becomes clear that the costs of migration to Italy can be very high.

#### ***Fathers migrated to the Middle East, sons migrating to Europe***

**Robiul** (H.3) is about 30 years old and migrated to Italy ten years ago after studying up to tertiary level without obtaining the final Degree. His family stands as an example of successful and remunerative migration to Saudi Arabia of the older generation that has subsequently funded the migration of younger generations to Europe.

Robiul's father who is in his late fifties described the economic situation of the family in very positive terms, explaining that his father was a wealthy and influential talukdar

(landlord) controlling many hectares of land. The family's situation worsened when the land had to be divided among his 5 sons, who sold some of it to pay for their sons' education. Slowly the five brothers and their sons managed to improve and make profit from different business initiatives and now they are well off again. Significantly Robiul's father said in talking about the family: *"we are a family of migrants, the first of us left Bangladesh in 1977"*. Robiul has in fact 2 paternal uncles who settled in Italy about 20 to 25 years before and a 3rd one who lived in different countries in Europe for about ten years and after that a few years in the Middle East.

Robiul's family live still in the old house they own outside Brahmanbaria Sadar town, but when Robiul's father returned from Saudi Arabia where he worked for 18 years, they built 2 houses in town, one of which is a six storied building. He used to send home 50 to 60 thousands taka (500 to 600 Euro<sup>6</sup>) every month in the name of an older brother who would according to his instructions, either spend or invest the money. Robiul's father has also invested money in a private insurance company and owns in partnership with some other people a private hospital. Robiul's younger brother is for the moment working with his father who doesn't exclude the prospect of sending his son to Italy as well.

In Italy Robiul has worked in a restaurant, in a factory, and lately in a shop. He also tried to set up his own business in partnership with a cousin, but lost 40.000 Euro that his father had sent from Bangladesh. 4 years ago he returned to Bangladesh for a brief period and got married; he does not plan to take his wife and his one year old child to Italy for the moment. His wife now alternates her residence between her parents and her in-laws and will enrol at university for a degree in English. Robiul's father said: *"In life sometimes you win, sometimes you loose, we lost 40 lakh taka (40.000Euro), but I told my son not to worry because we are fine here, and we wouldn't need money from Italy. If my other son also went to Italy I would be able to manage my business here"*.

Robiul's uncle **Enamul** (H.5), who lives nearby with his wife and children, has a different experience of migration. When he was approximately 20 years old, in 1987, he went to Austria on a study visa and from there went to Germany and France. He returned from Europe after 10 years and left again for Saudi Arabia from where he returned in 2002. He admitted that he wasn't able to make much money in Europe, but says also that if he was younger he would try again: *"my wife's brothers are in Rome. I could go, but I would not go as a labourer, I would go to carry out business. My son will continue studying, if he does well he will go up to University, otherwise I'll send him to Europe. I was a good student, I could have studied more, but there was this pressure to go abroad"*.

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<sup>6</sup> In November -December 2009, when the field-work was conducted the average exchange rate was 100 taka for 1 Euro .

Among the 27 households I visited there were 3 more cases where young men's migration to Italy had been preceded by their fathers' migration to the Middle East. Here I describe two of them. The third is the case of a family where both the father and some sons had worked in the Middle East, while other sons are working in Italy (see Mirza's case in next subsection).

**Russell's** (H.7) father had been a businessman for about 20 years in Saudi and with his earnings he was able to build a 5-storied house in the centre of Brahmanbaria Sadar. Russell, after studying up to Intermediate level (12th year of schooling), migrated to Italy three years ago. He admitted that he hasn't been able to earn enough to support himself and that his father had been sending him money regularly. Russell also said: "*my father sent me to Italy so that I learnt to live. I have understood many things and now I want to think at my life"..... "I'd like to set up in Italy an import-export business and live half there and half in Bangladesh..... I'll also have to get married because my father is old and ill and now I am 25"*. An uncle of Russell lives in England with his family and Russell is planning to send his two sisters there to study at the University. Russell also has three cousins who are living in Italy and one who migrated to the US with the whole family 8 years ago and resides permanently there.

**Taher's** (H.6) father has also worked in the Middle East for 10 years. One of his two sons has attempted without success to reach Italy illegally and now runs a small textile factory with his father and brother. The saris they produce are sold mainly in the local bazaar but they are trying to expand their business all over the country. Taher's family does not own new buildings in town. Taher and his brothers are less educated than Robiul and Russell, but they are well connected to local politically influential families. Taher still dreams of migrating to Europe and while showing us his factory, he told us he was exploring the possibility of setting up an import-export business of textiles with Italy, as his sister is married with a man who has been living in Italy for more than 10 years.

It is evident that for all these households migration to the Middle East has been quite profitable but also these were not families who had taken short-term low paid unskilled labour contracts in the Middle East. Robiul's, Russell's and Taher's fathers earnings from 'bepsa' (business) abroad, together with the assets, especially land, that these families owned in Bangladesh have helped consolidate what was already a fairly good economic situation. There are differences between these households namely the levels of education of both the older and the younger generation; and the length of the history of migration found in each household. However all the families have relatives abroad and migration is now a key and viable livelihood option as well as a routine instrument of social mobility. For these households, the high costs of migrating to Italy illegally, about 7-8 lakh taka (7000-8000 Euro), can be afforded without incurring debt. It is interesting also to note that although Enamul, Robiul, Russell and Taher, have not had satisfactory experiences, they see themselves as businessmen rather than labourers.

### ***Many sons, different destinations***

Another common migration pattern is where some siblings migrate to Middle East countries while others migrate to Italy.

*Mirza (H.1) , who is about 35 years old, has worked in Saudi Arabia for 10 years and in Dubai for 5 years as a driver. Two of his younger brothers live in Italy. He is waiting for one of them to arrange the papers for him to go: " I am better in Dubai than in Saudi. I work as a driver now and I earn 50, 000 taka per month. But I don't like Arab countries. Those who come from South Asia (except for the Pakistanis) are not treated well. The Arabs don't consider us as 'pakha' (mature, ripe, full) Muslims". ..... we know that in Italy it may be hard at the beginning, you'll have hard times for one, two, or three years but then you can earn up to 1,000 or 2,000 Euro per month."*

Mirza has two younger brothers who work in Dubai and 2 others in Italy. **Syedul** (H.1), the first of them to move, migrated to Italy in 2000 and has been working in a factory since 2003. In 2006 he returned to Bangladesh and got married. Six months after the wedding his wife joined him in Italy and 1 year later he also managed to bring to Italy with a regular working visa one of his younger brothers who has been working only sporadically so far. Mirza has been asking his brother for a long time to do whatever he can to take him to Italy as well. In Bangladesh, Mirza's father and stepmother live with the wives and children of Mirza and the other married brother.

During the research I came across 6 other households in situations similar to those of Mirza and Syedul. In all of them the old parents (sometimes just the other) are living with the wife and children of the brother(s) who were in some Middle Eastern country, whereas the wives of those who were in Italy had in some cases joined their husbands in Europe. It is not clear if this multiple site migration is a deliberate household choice, but it is certainly a recurring pattern.

Migration to the Middle East tends to be temporary and shorter term and this undoubtedly helps guarantee support for older parents who look after family property in Bangladesh. Households with many male siblings can differentiate their migration strategies by keeping one of the sons stable in Bangladesh. This is what I observed in some cases that I will consider later. Another characteristic of the households like Mirza's share is that when one or more sons have managed to settle in Italy even those who work in the Middle East may try to move to Europe. The reasons for this are both economic and cultural: the hope of earning more and a desire for a more 'open' and 'developed' social environment, where the judicial system works better, people are more equal and there is less political turmoil.

*"In Italy there are many Bangladeshi because you can earn more (taka beshi)... there is less trouble".*

*"There are many problems in Bangladesh....in Italy people are rich and they don't think of stealing...here there are problems...if you want to work...also political problems. In Italy there are people who don't like foreigners but according to the law everybody is equal".*

### ***Land, houses and sons: material and social resources***

Besides the households described so far, I interviewed 13 other families where one or more individuals had migrated or were attempting to migrate to Europe. In these cases, there was no previous experience of migration to other Middle Eastern countries in the households. With the exception of two of them these 24 migrant households were relatively well-off across a number of indicators. The families tended to live in fully furnished brick houses, and some in newly built multi-storied buildings in town, equipped with TV and built-in bathrooms. They all owned land which was given in share-cropping or directly cultivated. Those who resided in rural areas had livestock and farms. The older parents or brothers of migrants tended to run some kind of business, or take care of the land and assets of those who had settled abroad.

This finding can be understood in relation to the costs of migration. Migrating to Europe is much more expensive than migrating to any country in the Middle East. I was told by recent migrants that entering Italy or other European countries illegally, via either Russia and Eastern Europe or the Middle East, Turkey and Greece, can cost from 6 to 8 lakh taka (6,000 to 8,000 Euro). To migrate with a legal job contract, which the interviewees called 'sponsorship', can cost up to 15 lakh taka (15,000 Euro). In most cases however the migrants are told before leaving, or upon arrival in Italy, that the job they expected did not actually exist. Migrating to the Middle East is much less expensive costing between 1 and 3 lakh taka including the journey fare and the work contract.

Most of those in the study indicated that their families had to sell or mortgage out some land, or some jewellery, or both and/or had to take loans from an *attyio swajan* (relative, literally one's own people) in order to fund migration abroad. Here it is important to recall that in Bangladesh the ability to deploy non-material resources is an important factor of people's ability to forge a livelihood strategy. In particular, effective and reliable social relationships are key to people's wellbeing aspirations. While carrying out my doctoral research (Del Franco, 2007), I was frequently told '*Tel matae dhalo tel, sukno matae bhango bel*' that literally means: 'give oil to the oiled heads and break a bel (wood-apple) on the dry ones'. This proverb was quoted to me several times in Brahmanbaria. Women and men whose hair is dry and reddish are usually identified as very poor and of a very low status because they cannot afford to buy oil for their heads. The meaning of the proverb is thus: people give only to those who have something to exchange. This form of reciprocity creates an intimate and normally hierarchical dependency. This proverb resonates strongly with Devine's argument that in Bangladesh '*making*

*relationships function'* is an important condition for survival (Devine, 1999:87). For migrants, making relationships function is key for securing loans, accessing information, facilitating the logistic of the entire migration process, and for securing accommodation and work once abroad.

It is also worth quoting here what an old woman who lives with her disabled husband and her daughter, said comparing her situation with her migrant neighbours whose sons are in Italy: "*jara chele manush nei, cholte kostho*" (*those who don't have male children have to bear with hardship*). All the migrants or relatives of migrants I talked to seemed to have some kind of connection with relatives or neighbours abroad and with politically or otherwise influential persons at home. These have played a role in arranging the migration or funding it. For example to fund their son's migration to the Middle East and then to Italy, Taher's parents sold an old house and some land to a neighbour whose son, Uttam, is a good friend of Taher. Some time after Taher's attempt, Uttam decided to go to Greece. To find this, his father sold back some land to Taher's father. Many young migrants have been 'taken to Italy' by paternal or maternal uncles who were already settled there or by more distant relatives. The wife of a migrant living in Italy explained why so many people from the same area had migrated to Italy in the following way: "*It is like in Syleth, people follow those who have gone before, they go where they have relatives and acquaintances*".

**The following example illustrates well how they system works:**

**Shamim** (H.18) is a young men who has been waiting for three years to be taken to Italy by a Bangladeshi regularly residing there who had promised that he would provide him with legal papers even if he wouldn't be able to ensure a job once in Italy. In discussing the case with the young man's mother, she said "*We have already paid 13 lakh taka to a relative in Bangladesh who has sent the money to Italy. There the papers have been completed and submitted but we are being told that now it is not possible to go because 'Italy bondho' (literally: closed)*<sup>7</sup>". When I asked how they could be sure their contact in Italy wasn't cheating, she said: "*we trust this person because he is 'attyio' (relative), someone we know*".

The boy who was accompanying me in the field visits explained: "*this is how it works: for example, say that I live in Italy and you live in Bangladesh. I tell you that I can take one person to Italy. You then get the money from someone you know that wants to migrate and give it to me. Now, if I take the money without doing anything you will be grabbed by those who paid you and I will be grabbed by you. Everybody will get into trouble. So I can't run off with the money because you know me and they know you*".

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<sup>7</sup> It refers to the fact that in 2009 the Italian Government have not allowed any entries on the basis of quotas (except that for seasonal labour)

It is clear therefore that the capacity to support migration requires not only material resources, but also social resources in the form of acquaintances based on kinship, political alliances, business partnership. These networks help directly fund migration but also offer protection against the many risks involved. The three families I interviewed who had only migrated to the Middle East did not seem to have access or control to the same range of economic and social resources as families supporting migration to Europe.

**Rabeya** (H.25) works as a cleaner in private houses and her husband has been driving a rickshaw for many years. They have one son and one daughter. The son has been working in Kuwait for 11 years and 5 years ago when he came home for holiday he got married. His wife's two sisters are also married to some people working in the Middle East. Rabeya and her husband are almost illiterate but Rabeya says that she wants her daughter, who is now attending year 7, to continue studying: *"It has been a big effort to send her to school but education is important"*. Rabeya's son migration would have not been possible without the help of an affluent local politician in whose family Rabeya had worked in the past as a maid. She said that this person arranged her son's job and travel to Kuwait for free. Rabeya's son remits about 20 to 30 thousand taka (200-300 Euro) every two or three months.

Another of the three migrant households to the Middle East I visited comprises an old couple whose only son has been working in Kuwait for almost 30 years and the young wife of the migrant. An uncle of the migrant, leaving nearby, told me that the old parents forced their son to marry so that his wife could have taken care of them. The mother of the migrant said in front of the young bride that her son did not want to get married probably because he was already living with someone else in Kuwait.

We had a meeting in WARBE office in Brahmanbaria with the director of a local NGO that has been running a project targeting short-term international migrants to the Middle East. The project involves 700 households and about 2,200 beneficiaries and consists of training in income generating activities (fisheries, livestock rearing, shoes manufacturing) and micro-credit especially for wives who have been left behind. The NGO director confirmed that most of the beneficiaries had a very low level of education and were either small peasants or landless. Their families tended to spend most of the remitted money in current expenses.

We may therefore speculate that better-off households are much more likely to be able to afford the costs of international migration to Europe, partly because they can call on the help of a stronger social network. Among the quite well-off households that I visited there are some like Russell's and Robiul's whose members are more educated and who tend to give more importance to education. They also contemplate the possibility of sending some of their members to the UK in order to pursue higher education. I would say also that for the wealthiest families, the long-term objective of migrating to Italy seems to be to establish some kind of commerce or trade so that they can live in both

Italy and Bangladesh. This is related to the fact that some migrants said that they did not want to settle in Italy for good and that they intended to go back to Bangladesh after 15-20 years. Due to the high costs of migration it seems that migration to Italy can only be afforded by well-off households that would also be able to absorb the loss in case of failure (see for example Robiul's case).

This however doesn't mean that the poorer ones are completely excluded. As I said above I encountered two households that despite a lower socio-economic status attempted to send one of their members in Italy. In both these cases the household's economic losses are more than the gains. One of these cases is the household of Habib (H.10) that I consider in the next section.

The other one is the case of a young man in his 20s, **Rahim** (H.4), who tried more than once, without success to reach Italy. He has always been stopped in Turkey. During the last attempt one of his feet had to be half amputated in a hospital in Istanbul. He is now back home where he lives with his mother, his sister and two sisters in law whose husbands are in Saudi Arabia. Rahim's family had never been rich. His father, who was a small cultivator, died a few years ago. The few bigha<sup>8</sup> of land that the family owned were then sold to fund Rahim's migration. To finance Rahim's unsuccessful attempts to reach Italy, the family took loans from relatives and neighbours.

Rahim's mother and sister are worried that Rahim won't be able to find a job and complained that the other two brothers send only 20 to 30 thousand taka each every two months from Saudi Arabia. Rahim's brothers' migration to Saudi Arabia is recent, they are employed as labourers and their wages and remittances are low: *'We are not happy that our husbands are abroad, they don't earn much but they didn't have alternatives'*. During the visit to Rahim's house her sister didn't stop asking us to help him and the family and Rahim said that if he was given the opportunity he would try to migrate to Italy again, because *"there is nothing for me here, because of my accident I can't do hard work, I cannot work in the fields, my life is ruined"*. *"We know from what we see on TV that Italy is good (bhalo), money is important and in Italy, you can earn up to 1 lakh taka (1 thousand euro) a month."*

#### **4. The experience of migration: achievements, motivations and aspirations**

As mentioned in the introduction, most of the migrants I came to know were young men who had migrated to either Greece or Europe 3 to 12 years ago. In this section I will consider their achievements, especially in terms of their capacity to send remittances home and their experiences in the destination country, drawing from their narratives as well as those of their relatives. I start by considering those who have migrated to Europe 8 to 12 years ago. Their stories have many elements in common. Those who, like Robiul and

<sup>8</sup> One bigha corresponds to about 33% of an acre

Syedul, had originally gone *obhoido bhabe* (illegally) had either to pay a total of 5 to 7 lakh taka 9 to a dalal (middleman) in Bangladesh or to different dalals on the way, and entered Italy via Russia or Romania after a long and often dramatic journey. Most of those who entered Italy during this period were between 18 and 20 years of age. Once there, they had to hide and work without regular contracts for a while. Some of them had relatives in Italy who supported them and some reported having been helped by Italian families. Most migrants took 2 or 3 years to find a regular job and obtain a regular permit to stay.

Robiul, who had been in Italy since 2000, had been unable to remit much money home. As we have seen, he had worked in many places, including a restaurant, a factory and a shop. He also invested 40,000 Euro in a business that didn't work out. A few months before returning to Bangladesh for EID holidays at the end of 2009, he had rented a shop in partnership with someone else and he hopes the prospects for this business were better.

Syedul has been working in a factory in Italy for the last 7 years. Some of his brothers work in Dubai and his parents receive regular remittances from them. According to one of Syedul's sisters in law: "... so far Syedul's migration hasn't benefited the family much (*shubida beshi na*), when he started working in the factory he was earning more than now, but now in Italy the situation is not good (*obhosta karap*). Living expenses are very high in Italy and those who are there have to struggle a lot".

**Farook** (H.8) is another young man who migrated to Italy in 2002. He is one of 4 second cousins (another is Russell, mentioned above) who all migrated to Italy and tried to settle down in 4 different towns and with different outcomes. Farook's relatives would not say much about how Farook had been doing in Italy. Apparently he had been working in a restaurant for a while but at some point he left: he didn't like to work "*under someone else*". He then rented a shop with a Bangladeshi partner but according to his brother and one of his cousins "*he wasted most of his money there so that he couldn't do much in his country*".

His brother also claimed that he didn't know whether Farook went legally or illegally because he was abroad himself, but he knew that all the costs for Farook's migration were shared among his brothers. One of Farook's cousins confirmed that Farook had been working in a restaurant for some time but was fired and survived for a while on unemployment benefits. Farook's wife and sister in law knew very little about his circumstances and questioned me about business in Italy, the cost of living and so on.

Getting work, for those who had migrated 8 to 12 years ago had been a long and difficult process. Even those who, unlike Syedul and Robiul, entered Italy with a formal regular work visa had to struggle because those who had granted them the 'sponsorship' could

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<sup>9</sup> The 'prices' have increased to 7-8 lakh for irregular migration .

not subsequently provide a work contract. Over time however they had managed eventually to secure a work contract or to join some relative in some kind of business partnership. Some of them like Syedul for example have also managed to bring younger brothers to Italy. Most of them like Robiul and Syedul had returned to Bangladesh at some point and got married. Their parents, siblings and wives back home claimed that the level of remittances had not allowed them to invest in land or other assets, but it had allowed them to repay loans and meet current expenditures.

The experience of those who had migrated 2 to 3 years ago appears to be more negative. Some, like Syedul' s younger brother, have the advantage of counting on close support, but the majority - especially all those who migrated illegally - struggle to find a regular job and secure the necessary legal documents. Russell, who was introduced earlier, illustrates these kinds of cases well. He described his migration in the following way:

*" I went illegally (obhoido bhabe) through an uncle. I was in Italy for 3 years and I worked only for a short time, I was helped a lot by an Italian family who considered me like their son. My father kept sending money to me and before coming to Bangladesh this time I rented a shop with a partner. I hope that from now on things will improve... my father sent me to Italy because I had to learn to live for myself. Now I have to think for myself ... I would like to set up an import-export business so that I could live half in Italy and half in Bangladesh... I have lived in Italy just as I would in a prison... Without legal documents, life has no value".*

Habib' s mother talks of his migration in a similar manner

*"... we struggled to send Habib to Italy. He is our eldest son but he couldn't do much. We have many problems. We are a big family and Habib' s father is old and cannot work anymore. Habib has to look after his wife and two children and he also has 3 younger brothers and two sisters. He went to Italy legally through a sponsor, someone we know who lives in Italy. He said he could take Habib with him, but also warned he could not guarantee a job. We had to take loans from our relatives to fund the migration. Three years have passed and we haven't been able to return the money. Those who gave us the loans might think we are lying, but the truth is we are in trouble. Habib cries on the telephone... we are all in great difficulty".*

There is a significant contrast between Habib' s and Russell's situation in the clear difference in the socio-economic conditions of their families of origin. Russell's family lives in the multi storied luxurious house that was built with Russell's father earnings. Habib' s mother explained us that because of his precarious health condition her husband hadn't been able to work for some years and because Habib is their eldest son

he was sent to Italy so that he could help his parents and his younger brothers who still attend school. Habib' s wife and two children also need support. The family had to borrow all the money necessary for Habib' s migration.

Both families have had to support their son's migration but have been able to do this to different degrees and with different outcomes. Habib sends 20 to 30 thousands taka every 2 to 3 months but this is not enough to repay the debt contracted to fund his migration, let alone help improve the economic security of his relatives at home. On the other hand, Russell has been able to survive in Italy only with the money his father has sent him from Bangladesh (and Robiul's case is very similar). So while Russell is in a position to begin thinking about a new import-export business, Habib' s relatives (as many others) are turning to projects offered by WARBE and TDH in the hope that this might help Habib in Italy. Habib is not even in a position to bring his wife and children to Italy, as he lives with other 13-14 people in a small flat.

Migrants and their relatives are generally aware that migration to Europe implies a great deal of *kostho* (suffering, hardship) but this is regarded as worthwhile if eventually compensated by reasonable economic gain, assessed by most respondents as "*earning 1 lakh taka per month*". This is enough to take the first steps towards a more established position, the markers of which are: setting up one's own business in Italy, building one or more multi- storied houses in Bangladesh, and/or buying one or more flats in Basundara (a new development in the outskirts of Dhaka). There are several local examples of success, especially among the older generation of migrants. Most of the young migrants or prospective migrants I talked to had one or more relatives who had been living in Italy for 20 or more years, where they had settled with their families and had managed to buy apartments and run their own businesses.

Taher has two maternal uncles who migrated to Rome at the end of the 1980s. They left a third brother in Bangladesh (H.12) who manages his own big store in the local bazaar and also takes care of his brothers' land and businesses. Every year the two brothers with their family (the older child is 13 years old) pay a visit to their relatives in Bangladesh. Their sister in law was proud to show me the apartment they had furnished according to "Italian style" and cooked for me a spiced and tasty pasta dish because "*their children don't like Bangladesh food, when they come here [they] have to cook pasta for them.*" *When I asked the third brother whether his brothers had decided to settle in Italy for good he immediately replied: " Of course not, here they have properties and assets. They will work there for 15-20 years more and then come back here with all their children".*

Most of the relatives of migrants see migration as an opportunity for the betterment of the whole extended family, notwithstanding the global financial and economic crisis and the degree of *kostho* (suffering, hardship) and risk that migration entails. They expect that the migrants will personally do well economically and then try and help support the

subsequent migration of other family members. As I was told by some young men who were waiting for their 'papers': " *You need someone to go first and then the others will follow, now everybody wants to go because they have seen that those who went are building houses back home*". Prospective migrants are motivated by the positive experience of those who migrated in the past and an overall view that migration is a good and worthy initiative.

In some ways migrants also help construct a positive image of Italy and the opportunities available there by minimising their difficulties, perhaps exaggerating their achievements and sometimes lying about the nature of their occupation. I remember one occasion where two young migrants told me in Bengali that they were doing all-right in Italy and that they owned a restaurant. They said this in front of other Bangladeshis. Just before this discussion however the same two young men had told me, in Italian, that when they returned to Italy they hoped to find a job in a restaurant!

Others who claimed to be on holiday in Bangladesh from their job in Italy gave me very vague explanations of how their employer had given them such generous leave, suggesting that they had actually lost their jobs or never had a permanent one. Admitting to not having a job or to having lost one would undoubtedly be a loss face in front of relatives and indeed their samaj 10 (society). Migrants no doubt suffer but they make considerable effort to portray a positive image of their lives in Italy, to create what Waddington and Sabates-heeler (2003) call 'migration myths'.

### ***Young people's aspirations: dreams, fears and risks***

Migration for young men is not only a fulfilment of family aspirations, but is also linked to their individual motivations. Many of the migrants or prospective migrants I met in Brahmanbaria were young men in their late teens or early 20s who had stopped studying after matriculation or HSC<sup>11</sup>, and as described earlier belonged to fairly well-off families and had relatives or friends who had been or were in the process of migrating. Their experiences and aspirations may provide some insight into the motivations that underpin migration especially of young people.

**Masud** studied up to tenth grade but did not sit the final matriculation exam. After school he lived for 2 years in Dhaka where he played in a cricket team. He didn't want to explain why he left the sport, saying only that he had an argument with his parents and after that he decided to leave. He then tried to set up his own trade in Dhaka but he didn't like it. So he decided to go to the Middle East. His parents were not happy with his decision to leave Bangladesh but finally accepted it. After working in a factory

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<sup>10</sup> Samaj literally means society, but with the broader meaning of social and moral community

<sup>11</sup> Matriculation is obtained after passing the exams at the end of the 10 th year of study and HSC (Higher Secondary Certificate) is obtained after 12 years of study.

in the Middle East for one year, Masud attempted to reach Italy together with 3 other Bangladeshi friends. He took 4 months to reach Greece where he was caught without documents and sent to jail. He was repatriated from there through the Bangladeshi Embassy. One of his friends reached Lebanon, another went back to Bangladesh from Turkey after being caught at the border with Greece, and a third one managed to reach and settle in Greece. Masud's account of his four-month journey was as enthralling as it was excruciating. He reported that while moving from place to place he was promised good contacts that could help him move forward. Instead he was 'sold' to other dalals (middlemen) who then asked for more money and often kept them starving, hidden in a cellar. In Turkey he was caught and sent to jail. He was convinced he and his friends would all die and admitted that sometimes he wakes up at night thinking about his journey. When asked why he and his friends risked their lives to migrate he said: "*It is like a dream*".

However, initial bad experiences may not outweigh the appeal of perceived opportunities. **Rasheed** (H.19), who was caught at the border between Turkey and Greece, described his experience in this way:

*" I had decided to go to Italy and knew it was risky.... I wasted a lot of money in the process but believed that in Europe, the food is good, the social environment is good, people are good, there is no criminality, and everything works easily."* He also admitted that after being repatriated he had tried again to get a regular visa from the Italian Embassy.

The aspirations for a different life are strong:

Shamim is running a shop that his mother (the father died 5 years ago) bought for him. Two years ago, his family paid 13 *lakh* taka to help him migrate legally. He is still waiting on the necessary documents. Asked why he is so keen of moving to Italy he said: "*it is a desire, what else?*"

**Manik** (H.20) who works part time for a local NGO: "*I am not doing anything at the moment, I am just waiting to go. You know there is not much to do here; studying is not worthwhile because there are no jobs. I would rather go, I know it will be hard but I'll be alright.*"

There is some understanding of the risks, especially when they try to entry Europe illegally through unscrupulous dalals (whom some labelled as "mafia group") During a discussion with a group of peer leaders employed by WARBE, one of them recounted that one of his neighbours told all his relatives and his friends, before leaving for Italy, that they should forget about him and think of him as dead. He knew that illegal migration was very dangerous and he wasn't sure that he would reach his destination safely.

In a similar vein, a young man proudly told us that that he already had a work contract for Libya but that he had already decided to try and move to Italy from there. He knew that many illegal migrants had died in the attempt to cross the Mediterranean by boat. " *On the other hand*", he said: " *many people succeed and once in Italy I'll have people to help me*".

The imperfect assessment of risks is set against the sense of pride of those who managed to survive their trips to Europe and the way in which stories like that of Masud and Rasheed are presented or seen as success stories. There is no doubt that Masud has acquired a remarkable self-confidence as a result of his migration experience. He is very proud of what he has achieved and is very hopeful about the future. He has also secured a strong position of authority within his household and beyond. Russell's account is also insightful. His time in Italy is presented almost as a rite of passage: " *my father sent me because I had to learn how to live*" and " *now I want to take my life in my hands*".

These stories and these decisions have to be understood in the context of what opportunities there are for young people, their aspirations and their understanding of the risks they take. These young people are not happy with what they perceive as scarce opportunities at home; education is valued in itself but it is not perceived as leading to any valuable form of employment; government jobs are few and the salaries low; business and self employment are valued more but in order to be profitable you need connections; the political climate is unstable. Migration is therefore an option that is manageable and offers endless potential and opportunity. In some cases it appears that migration as lived by these young people can be also part of the process of becoming an adult. European destinations are attractive because they seem less shaped by social norms and the pressure from the samaj. This is well expressed by those who said that migration " *is a dream*" or a " *desire*" and that Italy is a good place because everything " *runs openly*".

## **5. The experience of migration: those left behind or staying behind**

Recent research and NGOs activists in Bangladesh suggest a variety of problems faced by those staying behind or left behind by migrants. Older parents and left behind wives and children might be particularly vulnerable if they belong to poor and small households as it has been observed in the cases of migration to the Gulf (Rashid, 2009). The amount of remittances may not be enough to repay the debt contracted to fund the migration, and the current expenses, let alone make profitable investments. In extreme cases the migrant might establish a new family in the country of destination and de facto abandon the wife and children. In these cases the left/stay behind's wellbeing would depend much on the availability and functioning of local social networks (Seeley and Gardner, 2007). Some research has pointed out the increased pressure on women in terms of work-load and responsibility to run the family and the negative effects on male children who would have to compensate for their fathers' absence, taking on more work

and giving up education (Afsar, 2003). On the other hand some studies also notice that women may gain from an extension of their tasks and responsibility in terms of social mobility and authority (Rashid, 2007).

There are actually a number of factors on which the impact of migration on the left/stay behind depends. These include the socio-economic status of the household, the economic and social resources its members can count on, the household composition and the number of dependants, besides, of course, the duration of migration and the amount of remittances.

Before discussing the impact of international migration on the left/stay behind in the 27 households of my sample it is necessary to define who the left/stay behinds are in this case. First of all we need to keep in mind that there are instances, of households from where people migrate both to Italy and to the Middle East, and that these two kind of migration are different in two important ways: family reunification is either very difficult or not possible in most countries of the Middle East whereas it is allowed by law in Europe; labour migration in the Middle East is short-term and contract bound.

We have seen that in 4 of the 27 households migration to the Middle East of the older generation preceded that of the younger, in other 7 households some siblings migrated to Europe and others to the Middle East. Thus in the households we visited we talked with different categories of women: young wives, whose husbands had migrated either to Italy or to some Middle Eastern countries and the older generation of women, mothers of the current migrants, some of whom had spent 10 to 20 years of their married life away from their husbands who had been working in the Middle East. The migrants or prospective migrants to Europe we met or whose relatives we talked to were (with the exception of one, H. 11) young men between 18 to 35 years old, some of whom were married and some unmarried. Some young migrants to Italy had taken their wives with them leaving behind their parents and siblings.

The structure of the family is an important factor to consider to understand the impact on women because it determines for example whether wives and children can count on other members of the family to substitute for the absent husband. I would say the in the case of the household I visited, the possible negative effects of the absence of the husband/father are mitigated by being most of them extended families that include up to three generations: the migrants' parents, the migrants, and the children of migrants. Bangladesh is a patri-local society where newly married couples usually reside with the husband's parents. All the young wives of migrants to Italy I met were at their in laws but they said that when their husbands were away they would alternate between their own parents and the in-laws. Among the households I visited I did not find any cases of migrants' wives who had been or were currently living on their own or with just their

children. Also I didn't find any cases of older parents living on their own, there was always a son who hadn't migrate with them or the wife and children of those who were in the Middle East.

It seems common for younger migrants to marry soon before leaving or returning after a few years to marry. In terms of family reunification in Italy, the majority of those who had migrated to Italy a long time ago (20 to 25 years) had settled in the country with their wives and children. Younger migrants tended to offer practical reasons for not taking their wives to Italy such as the fact that they themselves were still living precariously in little and crowded flats, or that their salary wouldn't be enough to support a family because of the high cost of living. Some were also convinced that their wives would be much happier in Bangladesh with their *attyo* (relatives) rather than being isolated in a flat. Most women on the other hand confirmed that they weren't interested at all in joining their husbands because they would have to leave all their relatives behind and they would find themselves among unknown people, or they would suffer from solitude inside small flats. Only one young bride said that she could not understand why her husband was not taking her to Italy. Like many others, she could not say what exactly her husband was doing in Italy or where he was living.

The second important factor to consider is that the Europe bound migrant households in my sample, even if to different degrees, are wealthy to the point that except two of them (H.4 and H.10), they have been able, so far, to cope with the ups and downs in the fortune of their migrant members. However it shouldn't be overlooked what the examples of H.4 and H.10 tell us: even if these two households managed to finance the very high costs of migration to Italy they haven't been able to absorb the losses, as other wealthier families have done. Other households may find themselves in the same situation: Italy is increasingly perceived as the best destination by young migrants who tend to underestimate the negative effects of the economic downturn in European countries.

The emotional and psychological impact of family separations is another important theme in the literature (Mazzucato and Schans, 2008). I couldn't explore this aspect much. Because of the short length of time I spent in Brahmanbaria, it was not possible to build the kind of rapport and familiarity that would encourage people to open up about their more intimate feelings. When asked about how they had coped or were coping with their husband's or son's absence, most women simply smiled and did not express much emotional discomfort. There were two exceptions: a young wife whose husband was in Kuwait and the mother of a migrant to Italy who for long time had not communicated and whom they feared dead. For most left behind, the discourse of *kostho* (hardship) or *dukkho* (sorrow) was in some ways accompanied by a discourse of resigned acceptance of the situation in the name of the need for money. All the

young wives said that the use of mobile phones has been greatly improving their situation and that they communicated with their husbands frequently.

Halima lives with her 9 year old son, her parents in law, a sister in law whose husband works in Dubai and their two children. Her husband (Mirza) has been working in Saudi Arabia and then moved to Dubai. She said that it had been really hard for her at the beginning when it wasn't even possible to talk on the phone. *" I was waiting all the time for him to say that he would come home. I have now got used to it, I spend a lot of time with my child...I help him study I watch TV, but in the past it was really difficult, I used to feel lonely. The migrants have all the same dream, that at some point they will be able to be with their wives. On the other hand...it wouldn't work without going abroad to work... you can't do without money".*

Enamul was abroad from 1987 to 2002, first in Europe and then in Dubai. His wife said: *" I ran the family when he was away, there were ups and downs, happiness and sorrow are always mixed".*

Farook' s wife: *" I would like to be in Italy with my husband, I don't know why he doesn't take me. My hope is to have "ekta bari, ekta gari" (literally an house and a car), that I will be able to educate my children, and we will all be happy."*

The mother of a migrant to Italy: *" I got sick for the tension of thinking at my son, I thought he was dead, I cried a lot, I got diabetes... but I helped him to move to Italy, I sent him money by selling my jewellery, my other sons don't know..."*

Regarding remittances I have already briefly dealt with them in the previous section. Here I want to highlight again that salaries in the Middle East are even in the case of semiskilled labour quite low compared to what migrants to Italy could potentially earn as factory workers. The young wives of the Middle East migrants complained about this. The wives of migrants to Italy were aware of the difficult economic situation worldwide and claimed that their relatives in Italy weren't able to remit as much as they would expect so that with the remittances they had not been able to cover more than everyday expenses. Only Rahim' s relatives claimed that they had not received any economic return from his migration. Rahim' s mother depicted a very difficult situation because of the debt that the family incurred and because her son was living a miserable life in Italy. She was also worried because of the pressure from those who had lent the money.

Regarding access and control of remittances the situation appeared to be very varied. Very young brides and especially newly married ones without children did not seem to have any direct access or control of the money that their husbands were sending

home. They all said that the money was sent in the name of the migrant's father, older brother or even mother, and that it was up to them to decide on how to use it. This is not surprising and resonates with research (see Del Franco, 2007) in rural Bangladesh about the status of newly married wives (*boukal*, literally the time of wifehood). The fact that one's husband is not present doesn't seem to alter the normative understanding of intra-household relationships that are assigned to the in-laws and especially to the mother-in-law in relation to young brides. Only after bearing children and when parents-in-law become too old or die, do women assume more visible household responsibilities. For example, I met an 89 year old woman (H.23) whose 2 sons were both away, the younger one with his family in Italy and the older one in Kuwait. The wife of the one in Kuwait goes to the bank to withdraw the money and discusses with her husband on the phone how to use the remittance as well as other issues related to the family. When Halima's husband was away, her mother-in-law used to send a servant to withdraw the money and then Halima would decide how to spend it after consulting her husband.

Migration by drawing men from the household for long periods of time may contribute to a change in how and by whom different roles and tasks are performed but also trigger deeper changes in terms of gender power relations. Because of the limited time over which the fieldwork has been conducted, this study cannot comment on this in an exhaustive way. However it is possible to make some speculative reflections on how migration may have at least partially challenged some of the norms that shape the gender division of labour and the way *purdah* is lived out.

It can be observed that even if in practice some wives are the ones who directly manage the household expenses and take everyday decisions when their husbands are away, the dominant discourse about what is appropriate for a woman seem to remain the same. So for example Enamul's wife said that when her husband was absent she was actually running the family. But she also added: " We are women (*mohila manush*), we can't go out much, and we don't work".

In many of the households I visited, women claimed that they had always observed *purdah* strictly, that they wouldn't go out without wearing burqa, and that inside their homes they would avoid any contact with unknown or unrelated male visitors. In fact in some of the families I visited, especially the wealthiest, the observance of *purdah* was also reflected in the separation of the spaces between men and women. So that for example if I wanted to talk to the women I had to join them in a bedroom or in the kitchen because they would not come into the reception room that was the most external and the one where visitors were received.

In one of these families we met a very young woman who was to be given in marriage to a man who had migrated to Italy about 10 years before. We were left alone in a room so that I could "ask her questions". She talked of her marriage and her feelings about it like she wanted to emphasize her complete adherence to dominant social and

religious norms about female and wife propriety. She said that she had no expectations from her husband or her married life and that she would completely put her life in Allah's hands and do whatever her parents and her husband asked her to do. She was proud to say that the different phases of her wedding ceremony would conform strictly to Islamic precepts and would exclude some rituals that in other areas of Bangladesh (and probably even in less religious families in Brahmanbaria) are performed even if they are more typical of the Hindu tradition.

There are also examples of practices and discourses which reveal a more nuanced situation relating to female propriety. Halima, for example appreciated the fact that her sister in law in Italy stays at home. *"My brother in law's wife is very good, she doesn't go out, and she prays regularly at home. There are other wives that are not so good, they go out and mix with others and then they end up arguing with their husbands."* Although Halima manages the household and organizes her child's schooling, she doesn't go to the bank: *"my husband wouldn't like that."* On the other hand she doesn't seem surprised by the fact that some Bangladeshi women in Italy take jobs and she is aware that in different places and social contexts, rules may be different. While comparing the Middle East with Italy she observed that: *"In Arab countries you cannot bring your wife, it would be dangerous, or you have to keep her locked in. In Italy there are no problems: you can decide, you may allow your wife to go out. Also women in Europe can work. Despite this, there are husbands that won't allow their wives to work, but other husbands do"*.

Again, Enamul talking about the situation of his wife when he was abroad, said: *"at that time my wife was independent (shadin). Of course, she was not completely independent because she was living with her parents and they were in charge of providing for the family. You know in Bangladesh there are rules, sharia, Islamic law which say that women have to be inside."* But he added: *"if women don't observe purdah the people talk. In Dhaka and in big cities women are freer because the samaj (society) is more tolerant. In these places women go out as they do in Europe".* Robiul's views also express the idea that rules may change according to context: *"my wife and my mother cook here, because that is something that pertains to women in Bangladesh where men don't cook. But in Italy where I live with my cousin and my sister in law, we cook when she has not time to do it"*.

Some men and women I met referred to Islamic religion as the main source of social norms and as an explanation of their position and opinion on different social issues. Others like Enamul and Robiul, by saying that the observance of *purdah* comes from the necessity of avoiding social disapproval and that the degree of women's mobility may vary in different social contexts, were in some ways relativising such norms. I asked the brother and the sister in law of two brothers (H. 12) who had been living in

Italy with their families for more than 20 years and who visit Bangladesh every year for summer holidays, how did their relatives adapt to a different social environment. I was answered that " *they didn't have problems, they are religious but from the point of view of everyday life they are secular*" (they literally said that their everyday life was like "English": *dharmik kintu cholaphera English*).

## **6. Conclusions and implications of the study for policy and future research**

This research had two main objectives: to explore aspects of the social risks and benefits of international migration from Bangladesh to Italy and to discuss the impact on those who are left or stay behind taking into account both economic and social dimensions.

First of all, it emerges clearly that:

- migration to Europe (either Italy or Greece) from Brahmanbaria Sadar is very expensive; all the participants to the study confirmed that 7-8 lakh taka (7 to 8 thousand euro) is the normal cost to enter Italy illegally and 13 to 15 lakh (14 to 15 thousand Euro) is the price for migrating through regular channels. It is also important to emphasize that even when the migrant enters Italy formally regularly (through what the migrants call 'sponsorship') the person who provided the documents rarely guarantees a job on arrival. Among the 27 households I studied only those who 'were taken to Italy' by a brother already residing there, paid only the plane fare and a small amount of administrative expenses to obtain the documents and could count on accommodation and economic support upon arrival.

The high entry costs make migration to Italy affordable and reasonably safe only for those households who belong to the most affluent socio-economic strata that can fund mobility without incurring too much debt and without selling all their assets.

A further finding however is that:

- the migrants who have left recently (3 to 5 years ago) have not been able, so far, to establish themselves in Italy in terms of finding a viable living in either business or employment and in some cases decent accommodation, let alone being able to remit money home. Some of them survived thanks to the help they received from their family from Bangladesh. Even those who migrated up to 12 years ago took a number of years before they could establish themselves and those who are employed in factories run the risk of losing their jobs because of the global economic downturn.

It becomes thus noteworthy that:

- men are very determined to migrate overseas, and increasingly particularly to Europe, and the research goes some way to suggesting some reasons for this. We can, I think, identify, three main sets of reasons:

- 1) There is some evidence in the community history and in individual biographies that migration to Italy can be, or has been, very remunerative. Relatives of the current migrants who migrated 20 to 25 years before managed to establish themselves overseas without losing contact with relatives back home. The remittances were profitably invested in the housing sector in Bangladesh and in some cases in some trans-national trade and business. This is public evidence of the potential of migration.
- 2) Secondly households who have experience of migration to the Middle East and South East Asia increasingly consider Europe as a more desirable destination for a number of reasons, social as well as economic. The Middle East and Southeast Asia not only provide more restrictive work contracts, but they are also socially and religiously more constrained. European society is perceived to be open and liberal, the political situation more stable, the working conditions better and the salaries higher. Furthermore in Europe family reunification is possible.
- 3) Thirdly the aspirational dimension of young men's migration should not be underestimated and this affects the choice of destination, despite the risks attached. Migration to Europe seems to be the most popular response to young people's aspirations for their future as the option that bears more potential for satisfying their 'dreams'.

Turning to the findings in this research relating to the impacts on those left behind, these suggest that:

- the effects on the left behinds depends very much on the socio-economic status of the household and on whether there are enough resources to bear with a negative migration outcome or with a long period where economic losses may be higher than gains. In most of the cases I studied and I would stress, up to this date in time, the bleak picture, where older parents and wives and children of the migrant are abandoned in Bangladesh with or without means of subsistence, does not seem to apply. Negative impacts were apparent for some economically marginal families whose members migrate to the Middle East with short-term labour contracts, although there is only a small number in my sample.

**From my case studies it appears clearly that:**

- the structure of the family holds. Whether or not it is a deliberate strategy, older parents or sometimes just the mother of the migrant(s) end up living with one or more sons that have not migrated or with the wives of those who are in the Middle East. Those who migrated to Italy many years ago have settled there with the whole family and some of the recent migrants have taken their wives with them as well. Migration to Europe is surely less harmful to family relations because of the possibility of family reunification.

- When women are left in Bangladesh, this choice is based on practical considerations and some of the wives agreed with their husband that the quality of their social life would be better in Bangladesh with in laws and parents. This is why in some cases we can talk in terms of stay behind rather than left behind. It has to be pointed out once again that the households we are talking about are strong in terms of both economic and social resources. The members of the extended family have assets in common, sometimes as we have seen siblings in Bangladesh manage their migrant brothers' business on their behalf and newly married wives become part of a new set of social relationships without losing contact with their own families. Having said this, we must also keep in mind that the left behind's well being and the possibility of the wives joining their husbands depends very much also on the migrants finding in Italy a satisfactory economic situation. This appears to be more and more difficult due to the present economic downturn and this is likely to put more pressure on and to worsen the situation of the left/stay behind.
- Women's status in terms of decision making, mobility and work-load when their husbands are absent differs from one situation to the other. Overall I would say that both women and men 's discourses tend to conform to what is perceived as the proper asset of the division of labour and gender relations, either in the name of religion or 'culture'. Nonetheless some discourses express the awareness that some aspects of 'culture' can be subject to change in different social contexts.

The more intangible emotional and psychosocial impacts of long separation for married couples were not very accessible to me in the short time available for fieldwork.

#### Implications for policy

- One of the important findings of this study is that people are very determined to migrate and that both at the household and at the individual level the decision to move may depend on a range of motivations that go well beyond a simple calculation of the economic costs and benefits.

In this perspective activities targeting the left/stay behind have to be designed in relation to two main objectives:

1. to create safety nets for parents, wives and children to face possible situations of economic difficulty due to a worsening of the condition of the migrant in Italy. For the moment in Brahmanbaria Sadar this appears to concern a minority of cases.
2. to find ways of easing the transition for women who join their husbands abroad. In organizing language and other courses for prospective migrants and women it must also be taken into account that guaranteeing the respect of purdah' s norms (organizing for example separate classes for men and women) could be a necessary condition to encourage women's participation.

- Another very important issue is that of the high costs of migration and in many cases the high risks attached to it. Even in the cases where the migrant reaches Italy 'regularly', it takes a long time before he can establish himself and remit money home. Without entering into a discussion about the strength and weaknesses of Italian Immigration Law which is outside the scope of this paper, it is important to strengthen the activities of the current project in reducing the costs of migration and making the prospective migrants and their families aware of its risks. This might be done by finding ways of intervening in the phase of decision making, for example by making sure that the awareness raising campaign reaches more categories of people such as:
  - Young people in school and colleges.
  - Young people who have dropped out from school
  - Returnee migrants from the Middle East (and their relatives) who might be considering the opportunity of changing their destinations.
- This study also reveals the many ways that migration Europe and migration to the Middle East are interconnected, so that dealing with migration to Europe as a separate process is artificial. It is advisable that WARBE and Terre Des Hommes liaise with the organizations operating in Brahmanbaria Sadar area that are supporting migrant households to the Middle East and consider the possibility of organizing joint interventions.

Since Greece and Spain are other possible destinations in Europe, it might be worth considering the opportunity of providing language courses for the wives and other categories of prospective migrants, even in Spanish and Greek and develop material for the pre-departure training on Greece and Spain as well as on Italy.

- This research has also highlighted the need for further research, especially studies adopting mixed quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Key themes are:
  - 1) The modalities of the migration process, the migration experience and the situation of the left/stay behinds also in the three other areas where the program: " Promoting safe migration and local development in four districts in Bangladesh through awareness raising, skills development and institutional capacity building" is being implemented. In alternative it is advisable to extend the research to at least another district for a comparison with an area with different socio-economic characteristics.
  - 2) Young people's aspirations and expectations for their future in relation to the different options that are available locally and in the country in relation to education, employment, self-employment and other kinds of occupation.
  - 3) The structure, functioning and needs of what increasingly appear to be trans-national families and how they adapt to a changing socio-economic situation in the country of origin and destination.

## Appendix

Table 1. Migrant households to Europe and Europe / Middle East

Household No	Name of migrants	Members of the household in Bangladesh and relation with the migrant(s)	Waiting to migrate	Current migrants to Italy (number and description)	Marital status of migrants in Italy	Current migrants to Middle East	Past migrants Failed attempts to migrate
1)	Syedul, Mirza	Halima (Mirza's wife) and their son; Mirza's sister in law with two children; Mirza's parents		2 Syedul, migrated in 2000 his brother joined him in 2007.	1 married, wife in Italy, 1 son	Mirza's 2 brothers	Mirza's and Syedul's father to Middle East
2)	Ali	Parents 1 brother with his family. Wife		3 Soghir migrated in 2000, 2 brothers migrated 1996.	3 married: 2 wives in Italy, Ali's wife in Bangladesh		
3)	Robiul	Parents, 1 unmarried younger brother, Safed's wife		1 Robiul migrated in 2000	1 married, wife in Bangladesh, 1 son		Safed's father to Middle East
4)	Rahim	Rahim mother 2 sisters in law with children 1 unmarried sister				2 Monir's brothers	Monir tried to reach Italy, stopped in Turkey
5)	Enamul	Enamul Wife 2 sons					Enamul, Europe first then Middle East
6)	Taher	Taher Parents 1 brother unmarried					Taher tried to reach Italy Taher's father in Middle East
7)	Russell	Parents 2 sisters		1 Russell in Italy since 2007	Unmarried		Russell's father in Middle East
8)	Farook	Parents 1 brother with wife and child wife and child		1 Farook in Italy since 2002	1 Married, wife in Bangladesh		Farook' s brother Middle East
9)	Saif	Parents 2 brothers (1 waiting to go to Italy)		1 Saif in Italy since 1999	1 married, wife and children in Italy		
10)	Habib	Parents 2 younger brothers wife and 2 children		1 Habib in Italy since 2007	1 married wife and children in Bangladesh		
11)	Swapan	Wife 1 son 1 daughter		1 Swapan migrated to Italy in 2008	1 married, wife and two children in Bangladesh		

Household No Name of migrants	Members of the household in Bangladesh and relation with the migrant(s)	Waiting to migrate to Italy	Current migrants to Italy or Greece (number and description)	Marital status of migrants in Italy, Greece,	Current migrants to Middle East	Past migrants And failed attempts to migrate
12) Ratif, Jahangir	Brother with wife and children		2 Ratif, Jahangir in Italy since 1985 and 1990 respectively	2 married wives and children in Italy		
13) Uttam	Parents 1 brother with family 1 sister unmarried		Uttam in Greece since 2005	unmarried		
14) Shahin	Parents 1 brother with wife and child 1 younger brother student		1 Shahin in Italy since 2006	unmarried	1 married brother 1 unmarried brother	
15) Tareq	Mother Sister in law with 2 children		1 Tareq in Italy since 2002	married, wife and children in Italy	1 married brother	
16) Sohag	Parents Wife with 2 children Sohag	Sohag				
17) Aziz	Mother Wife and child 1 brother with wife and child		1 Aziz in Italy since 2008	married, wife in Bangladesh		
18) Shamim	Mother Brother with family 2 unmarried sisters Shamim	Shamim				
19) Rasheed	Parents 2 brothers with wives					Rashid tried to reach Italy
20) Manik	Parents 1 younger brother Manik	Manik				
21) Atik	Parents 1 sister in law with child 2 brothers student		1 Atik in Greece in since 2004	unmarried	2 married brothers	
22) Amir	Father Brother with wife Wife with child		1 Amir in Italy .since 2000 2 nephews in Italy	1 married, wife in Bdesb 2 unmarried		
23) Raju	Mother Sister in law with child		Raju in Italy since 2008 1 brother since 1998	1 Raju unm. 1 brother mar.	1 married brother	
24) Parvez	Parents 1 brother and wife		Parvez in Italy since 2000	Unmarried	1 brother in Middle East	

Table 2 Households with migrants to Middle East

Household no Name of interviewee	Household members in Bangladesh and relation with interviewee	Migrant to the ME and relation with interviewee
25) Rabeya	Husband Daughter in law daughter	Son, married
26) Rohima	Parents Husband Daughter in law and child	Son, married
27) Selina	Husband Daughter in law son	Son, married

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ISBN 978-984-33-2151-0