

## EXIT AND VOICE: MIGRATION, MOBILE PHONE AND WOMEN'S MOBILITY IN BANGLADESH

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In the early years of Bangladesh in the 1970s, the author, an undergraduate student of sociology at Dhaka University, was invited to meet a delegate of young Americans who came to the newly-independent Bangladesh on a study tour. A young, female anthropologist in the delegation asked the author: why there were so few women seen on the streets of Dhaka. This was not obvious to the author at that time until pointed out by the American woman. The author hesitated with a tentative answer attributing the absence of women in the public to the religious strictures on women's free movement in Bangladesh where Islam was (and is) the dominant religion. And the religious prescription of seclusion (*purdah*) was restricting the mobility of women. By mid-1980s – in a decade's time – a large number of women were seen in the streets of Dhaka while the dominant religion remained, more or less, unchanged.

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No visitor to Bangladesh today in 2015 would ask those questions anymore. Not only on the streets of Dhaka or Chittagong but also in the higher echelons of politics, journalism, legal profession, civil service, police and defense forces, women are visible in the public sphere in Bangladesh and beyond. In that sense, Bangladesh has followed the model of Muslim majority countries of the Southeast Asia such as Indonesia and Malaysia than those in West Asia.

In recent years, Bangladesh has experienced significant progress in women's mobility with positive impact on the transformation of traditional gender role resulting in the empowerment of women. The achievement of key Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) related to women in Bangladesh has been well received in the international community. Even before the

announcement of the Millennium Development Goals, women in Bangladesh were making their presence in selective labour markets unencumbered by the so-called traditional gender-role restrictions transgressing strict religious codes. Bangladesh society showed a great deal of openness to the extent that Bangladesh Airlines had female airlines pilots<sup>1</sup> as early as in the 1980s (Khondker and Jahan, 1989).

## Conceptual Framework

Albert Hirschman famously provided a template of choices between exit and voice as two options when people are confronted with an uncomfortable situation in the context of a business firm, organisation and even the state. People exercise these choices as responses, either they vote with their feet (exit) or they stay put and complain (voice) (Hirschman, 1970). Sometimes, changes in the organisations have come about because of these responses. While in the present paper, the idea of exit as voting with one's feet or migration – both internal and external (international), permanent or temporary – is retained; some conceptual innovations are attempted with regard to voice. Voice needs not be complain or open protest, in some circumstances, voice could be seen as manifested in a marginal improvement in decision-making capacity in the context of family, or of local community may be considered as relative empowerment.

It is argued here that yet, under certain considerations, one can envisage a complementary and a co-presence of these two choices with positive outcome for women's empowerment. If we consider exit as a strategy of temporary migration that would enhance one's income and for voice, the female migrants are a case in point. They have chosen the exit option to escape from an oppressive patriarchal society and to secure economic power, which would enhance their power within their family, thus chipping away the power of patriarchy. By exercising the exit option, women also enhance their social freedom.

The voice here has, at least, two dimensions. One, they subjectively gain power by securing their role in decision making. At another level, with the access to mobile phone, especially internet-enabled smart phone, they can

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<sup>1</sup> On 4 August 1984: A Fokker F-27 from Chittagong to Dhaka, crashed near Dhaka, killing all 49 people on board. Captain Kaniz Fatema Rokhsana, the airline's first female pilot, made two attempts to land in reduced visibility but could not find the runway. On the third attempt the Fokker F-27 crashed in swamps 1,640 feet (500 m) short of the runway. (Communication with Mr. Waliul H. Khondker, a retired official of Bangladesh Biman).

give full play to their voice through connectivity. The mobile technology is in keeping with high mobility of men and women in the village society. As the flow of migration increased, the growing need for communication was first met by the Grameen-initiated village phone lady, who would go door to door to sell the service of connectivity and now, by commercially available mobile phone companies. As more mobile phones were available directly to the people, especially to women, they were able to use connectivity to their various advantages.

## Urbanisation and Development

In the first and a half decade of the twenty-first century, women in Bangladesh have achieved some important milestones in achieving, *inter alia*, developmental goals outlined in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) such as reduction of maternal mortality and enhancement of female literacy. Female literacy rates in Bangladesh for the 15 – 24 age group rose from 44.7% in 1991 to 63.6% in 2001 and estimated 79.9% in 2012 (UN Statistics, 2015). Maternal mortality per 100,000 live births declined from 550.0 in 1990, 440.0 in 1995, to 130.0 in 2013 (UN Statistics, last updated 7 July 2014). Bangladesh also experienced success in reducing infant mortality rate from 1990 to 2013.

Table 1: Infant Mortality and Maternal Mortality in Bangladesh in Selected Years

Year	Infant Mortality Rate (0-1 year) per 1,000 Live Births	Maternal Mortality per 100,000 Live Births
1990	99.6	550
1995	81.0	440
2000	64.4	340
2005	50.9	260
2010	38.9	200
2013	33.2	130

The paper draws upon a research carried out by the author on the impact of micro-finance on women's modernity in Bangladesh in 2011-12 (Khondker, 2014) supplemented by the data on the spread of mobile technology in Bangladesh in the last decade.

For Pitirim Sorokin, social mobility is understood as any transition of an individual or social object or value—anything that has been created or

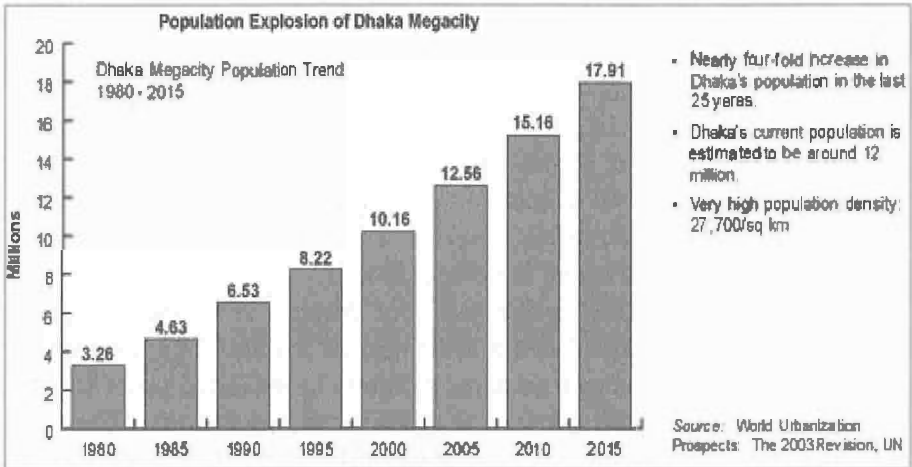
modified by human activity—from one social position to another. There are two principal types of social mobility—*horizontal* and *vertical*. *Horizontal* social mobility means the transition of an individual or social object from one social group to another situated on the same level. Transitions of individuals, as from the Baptist to the Methodist religious group, from one citizenship (assuming the countries have similar status) to another, from one family (as a husband or wife) to another by divorce and remarriage, from one factory to another in the same occupational status, are all instances of horizontal social mobility. In all these cases, movement may take place without any noticeable change of the social position of an individual or social object in the vertical direction. *Vertical* social mobility indicates the relations involved in a transition of an individual (or a social object) from one social stratum to another. According to the direction of the transition, there are two types of vertical social mobility: *ascending* and *descending*, or *social climbing* and *social sinking*. According to the nature of the stratification, there are ascending and descending currents of economic, political, and occupational mobility, not to mention other less important types (Sorokin, 1959). Sociologists have often observed a link between geographical or horizontal mobility with social or vertical mobility.

Women in Bangladesh in the past four decades since the emergence of Bangladesh have experienced a great deal of mobility both in terms of geographical mobility as well as status mobility. In the initial years after the emergence of Bangladesh or, for that matter, even during the war of liberation in Bangladesh, a huge number of populations, estimated at 10 million, crossed the international border to enter the bordering regions of India to escape the ravages of war (Khondker, 1995) and a large number of people, for which few estimates exist, were internally displaced. While after the temporary-forced migrants or refugees returned after the independence of Bangladesh, and were rehabilitated, the trend of internal displacement continued due to privations and economic difficulties in the post-independence Bangladesh. The difficult economic circumstances in the formative years of Bangladesh forced many men and women, to exit their homes in the rural hinterland to migrate to cities, leading to the burgeoning population in the four major cities of Bangladesh.

In fact, the population of Dhaka started growing rapidly after the creation of Pakistan in 1947 as large number of Indian Muslims migrated to what was then East Pakistan. Dhaka was one of the major destinations of migrants from India. The total urban population rose from 1.83 million in 1951 to about 2.64 million in 1961. A phenomenal growth took place

during the 1961 to 1974 period, with the increase being as high as 137.6 percent. The growth rate was 6.7 percent per year during the period as against 3.7 percent per year in the previous decade (Islam, 2012:1). The rapid urban growth during this period was largely due to migration of poor people from rural areas who wanted to escape poverty and hunger. The rural push factors, caused by economic impoverishment following the liberation war in 1971 and environmental disasters in the following years contributed significantly. Rate of natural growth of population was also quite high (Islam, 2012:1).

Table 2: Population Explosion in Dhaka City



Source: World Urbanisation Prospects (2003), United Nations

Bangladesh has also seen a remarkable decline in fertility. Between the early 1970's and late 1980's, Bangladesh experienced a significant decline in fertility (6.3 to 4.3, BDHS 2007). After this period, the Total Fertility Level (TFR) leveled off for almost a decade (1993 to 2000), remaining at approximately 3.3 children per woman. Since 2000, the TFR has been declining again and the current TFR is 2.7 (GTZ, 2010:17). All the governments since Bangladesh's independence in 1971 had given population control and family planning a priority. But fertility decline in Bangladesh is also a result of continued economic growth. While a declining fertility trend allowed women to go outside their households to take up paid employment, the mobility of women also plays a role in the reduction of fertility. Social demographic studies show that increase female education, employment and status also contribute to the decline in fertility. According to the GTZ report, female

education, female employment, improvement of women's status and exposure of the mass media contributed to the decline in fertility rate (GTZ, 2010:26).

With the rise of Readymade Garment Industries, where women comprised over 90% of the workforce, Bangladesh saw exit as an option - from their village homes to the adventurous journey to the cities in search of employment and experience a new life. Eighty percent of the 4 million garment workers are women (Saxena, 2014). Women's employment in garment industry has not only provided a cheap and non-unionized workforce for the industry contributing to its growth to a multi-billion dollar industry, it has had beneficial impact in drawing women from informal to a more formal sector providing them a cash income. It also has had a favorable impact on the education of women and female children (Heath and Mobarak, 2014).

One of the consequences of expansion of women's non-household employment was their consumption choice. Bangladeshi women swelled the ranks of consumers of cosmetic products, propelling the cosmetic industries in Bangladesh. The growth of many of such consumption-oriented industries can be attributed to a changed self-image of women who earned an income by working in the garment industries. It was also a symbol of their newly acquired self-awareness and identity. With the availability of affordably priced mobile phones many of them became the users of mobile phone.

## **The Mobile Phone Revolution**

The penetration of mobile phone in Bangladesh has been spectacular. During a fieldwork conducted in Bangladesh in 2011, one of the complaints voiced by the men in the villages was that even the school girls were taking phones to their schools, which are not only a distraction from their education but also allows them the launch undesirable liaisons. Interestingly, many of the parents (mainly, fathers) were concerned about the "negative influences" and "misuse" of the mobile phones. The mothers, on the other hand, showed a high level of career aspiration for their daughters. Many of the village mothers, in focus group discussions, revealed that they want their daughters to finish medical schools. A similar aspiration was expressed to the author by an interviewee in Abu Dhabi when a Bangladeshi driver asked the author for an advice over the right medical college in Bangladesh for his daughter.

Telephony was an exclusive privilege of the rich in East Pakistan, as Bangladesh was called under the Pakistani rule from 1947 to 1971. In the first decade of Bangladesh, telephone was still limited to the upper and some politically well-connected people. In the early 1980s, the author's family needed assistance from the Prime Minister's office in securing a landline. Then, the state-owned Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board (BTTB) had the monopoly for providing telephone services. In 1990, hardly 0.21% of the people in Bangladesh had telephone connection for landlines. Telephone lines did not reach the vast swath of villages. (UN Statistics, 2007, August 16).

The first mobile phone company in the private sector began in 1993 when a government crony and a prominent businessman owned-company, Pacific Bangladesh Telecom in Bangladesh, was given monopoly over mobile phone in Bangladesh. At that time, it was Motorola-made large handphones that were made available to the rising rich class in Bangladesh. It was both handy for the business class as well as a status symbol. In order to secure a Motorola phone, one had to pay Taka 100,000 a substantial amount in the 1990s in Bangladesh.

Following the elections of 1996, when Awami League government took office, the monopoly in mobile telephone business was broken. New mobile service providers such as Aktel joined the ranks. Aktel is a private mobile phone company that was launched in 1997 as a joint venture between Telekom Malaysia and the AK Khan Group, a prominent business house in Bangladesh. The company was later renamed as Axiata (Bangladesh) Ltd after Japanese NTT DoCoMo bought AK Khan's 30 percent share in AKTEL in 2008. Axiata was rebranded as Robi in March, 2010 (*The Daily Star*, March 29, 2010). According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB), "the country's mobile revolution began in 1997 with the introduction of the Village Phone programme by Grameen Telecom, where ADB's private sector operations provided an initial investment of US\$1.6 million in equity and US\$16.7 million in loans. Grameen Telecom is one of the shareholding companies of Grameenphone, and is a subsidiary of the Grameen Bank, an internationally recognised microfinance bank" (Ahmed, 2010). The number of cellular subscribers increased from 0.02% in 1997 to 13.25% in 2006 and 75.92% in 2014 (UN Statistics, 2015), (accessed on 11-11-2015). By providing phone to the Village Phone operators, popularly known as, phone ladies, some women were able to become phone owners without having any prior savings and they in turn provided village people with access to telecommunication connectivity (Yusuf and Alam, 2011). However, despite

the pioneering role of the Grameenphone, it faced stiff competition with private telecom companies coming into the market.

**Table 3: Yearly Increase In Mobile Phone Subscribers In Bangladesh**

Year	Percentage of Mobile Phone Subscribers
1997	0.02%
1998	0.06%
1999	0.11%
2000	0.21%
2001	0.39%
2002	0.78%
2003	0.98%
2004	1.97%
2005	6.29%
2006	13.21%
2007	23.47%
2008	30.17%
2009	34.35%
2010	44.95%
2011	55.19%
2012	62.82%
2013	74.43%
2014	75.92%

Source: UN Statistics Division, 2015 (accessed on 11 November 2015)

As of the end of July 2015, the total number of mobile phone subscriptions has reached 128.769 million in Bangladesh.

**Table 4: The Mobile Phone Subscription in Bangladesh as of July 2015**

Operating Company	Subscribers (In Millions)
Grameen Phone Ltd. (GP)	53.980
Banglalink Digital Communications Ltd.	32.406
Robi Axiata Ltd. (Robi)	27.921
Airtel Bangladesh Ltd. (Airtel)	9.080
Teletalk Bangladesh Ltd. (Teletak)	4.221
Pacific Bangladesh Telecom Ltd. (Citycell)	1.161
<b>Total</b>	<b>128.769</b>

Source: <http://www.btrc.gov.bd/content/mobile-phone-subscribers-bangladesh-july-2015> (accessed on 15 November 2015)



## Women as Migrant Workers

Although migration has a long history, official labour migration from Bangladesh began in 1976 (from which date data are available and recorded). Between 1976 and 2013, 8.5 million Bangladeshis have gone overseas. Since the data on return migration is not available, it is hard to ascertain how many Bangladeshis are overseas at the moment. The author and many more like him left Bangladesh to pursue higher education on their own, for which hardly any data can be found. Those who officially left Bangladesh to work as foreign workers (mostly as temporary workers in the Middle East) had to return home at some point. But the author's current ongoing research shows that for many Bangladeshi workers in the United Arab Emirates, the term "temporary" is only "temporary" an technical term; in fact, they have lived virtually all their adult life in this country. This applies to most who came under the *kafala* system of private sponsorship. Although *kafala* system has been subjected to various criticisms, for many Bangladeshis in the United Arab Emirates, this seemingly outmoded institution has served well. For women of Bangladesh, the option of labour migration as an option began in 1991 and between the start and 2013, 247 thousand Bangladeshi women have left home to work overseas. (ILO, nd).

A large number of migrants from the Asia-Pacific region are women. Female emigrants from the Asia-Pacific region constitute 44% of all migrants. There has been an increase of 53% from 1990 to 2013 (MPI, 2015).

Table 5: Female Migrant Stock from Bangladesh

Year	Female Migrant Stock
1990	122,165
2000	136,912
2010	181,091
2013	186,585

Source: MPI 2015

The growing number of female migrant workers from Bangladesh to the Middle East and to destinations in Southeast Asia has not only exposed them to exploitation but also enhanced their capabilities by opening the doors of employment opportunities.

Table 6: Growth in Female Migrant Workers

Year	Number of Female Migrant Workers	Female Migrant Workers as % of Total Migrant Workers
1991	2,199	1.49%
1996	1,994	0.85%
2000	454	0.20%
2004	11,259	4.12%
2005	13,570	5.37%
2010	27,706	7.09%
2013	27,051	13.0%

Source: ILO and Government of Bangladesh

The top destinations for Bangladeshi female migrants are the following countries.

Table 7: Bangladeshi Female Migrants and Destination Countries (in%) from 1991 – June 2013

Countries	Female Migrants (in %)
Lebanon	30.04 %
UAE	25.06 %
Jordan	14.5 %
Saudi Arabia	13.01%
Mauritius	4.59%
Oman	4.33%
Kuwait	3.10%
Malaysia	2.63%

Source: ILO and Government of Bangladesh

The number of migrant women in the UAE has been growing steadily since 2013 when the number of male workers was reduced and labour migration was restricted to household employment. The latest numbers are not available.

Although the literature on remittance fueling economic development has grown exponentially and has now become a development *mantra* (Kapur, 2003), it is yet to be definitive about the actual or net benefit in view of economic (Haas, 2012) and emotional costs (Rajan, 2013) of migration, it can be stated that in terms of empowerment (not just economically) migration has played an important role for changing the lives of women in

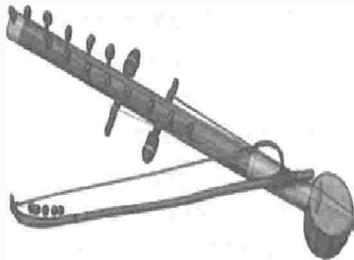
Bangladesh. In the opening up of the opportunities for women's migration, the government has played a part but much more needs to be done in protecting the rights of female migrants, or else the gains that the women have made can be undermined by violation of rights, oppression and exploitation. Both local and international non-governmental agencies (NGOs), international organisations and international human rights organisation are increasingly adding their voice to ensure the migrant women's voice is heard. Much more needs to be done in ensuring a positive outcome when exit and voice produce a positive outcome for the mobile women. However, one should not be complacent and ignore the continued discrimination and oppression that women face in the everyday life in Bangladesh and it is important to emphasise the conceptual ambiguities surrounding the concept of empowerment. Yet, one has to use some conceptual categories such as empowerment and capabilities. Empowerment is a fashionable term lacking a precise meaning but the definition provided by Naila Kabeer is helpful.

"...(E)mpowerment refers to the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such ability (Kabeer, 2005: 13). We can look at empowerment broadly as enhancement of capabilities and narrowly as makers of choices. In other words, empowerment gives women much needed voice. The spread of mobile phones gave women not only voice but connectivity, and a link to the world beyond their narrow limited space of home.

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