



## POLITICAL IMPACTS OF REMITTANCES: A Micro-level Study of Migrants' Remittances in a Village in Bangladesh

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### Abstract

Recently migrants' remittances have been considered as one of the major sources of development funding for grassroots development in the labor-sending countries in the Third World. However, the whole discussion about remittance and its developmental impact is heavily tilted towards the economic consequences overlooking other socio-cultural dimensions. This study aims at the political consequences that remittance produces in the home communities of the migrants and finds considerable influence of remittance in restructuring the political participation on the levels of both the community and the family.

**Keywords:** Remittances, Political participation, Community organizations, Women empowerment, Bangladesh

### Introduction

Recently, a lot of money is flowing from the developed regions that receive migrants to the home countries of those migrants in the Third World (IFAD, 2007). Since remittances directly reach the grassroots level, which is difficult for the development agencies to reach, this money has generated enormous optimism about grassroots economic development and poverty reduction. This is also true about Bangladesh; in recent years thousands of Bangladeshis are migrating abroad and sending large amount of remittances, which totaled over \$8 billion and constituted about 13.8 percent of the GDP of Bangladesh in 2006 (IFAD, 2007). The major characteristic of the Bangladeshi migrants is labor migration, the most obvious benefit of which is remittances including money and other non-monetary goods. The migration of family members and the remittances that they send back home have a range of socio-economic impacts on both community and family.

Taylor *et al* (1996) argue that there are indirect effects of international migration that may have significant influence on the nature and direction of the ways migration affects national development as the direct effects have. Emphasizing on the 'multiplier effects', Jennings & Clarke (2005) find a significant portion of remittances are saved, invested in family-business and agricultural inputs, and education and health all of which have profound influence on national development. De Haas (2005) also argues that remittances contribute significantly to development and living conditions in sending countries. One crucial observation is that the literature on remittances and development overwhelmingly emphasizes the impact of remittances on the economic development ignoring other dimensions of the impact. Brown (2006) observes that migrants move abroad and remit money for various other reasons and these motives have considerable political implications, too. As such, realizing the development potentials of remittances need to address all these complex dynamics of motives and usages of remittances both in the host and home countries. Therefore, development has to be defined more broadly to include social, community, and political dimensions, and that economic

remittances have important political and social meanings (Goldring, 2004). However, very few studies have been conducted to assess the impact of remittances on the home community in Bangladesh. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to assess the political consequences of remittances on the community level with particular emphasis on how remittances affect political structures at the family and community level. By political impact, we refer to how remittances influence the migrants' family members getting access to the power structure of the local community organizations and also access to family authority by some particular family members.

## 1. Methodology

### 1.1 Brief sketch of the study area

The study is conducted in a village named Raipur in Meherpur district. It is three miles away from the district head quarter. The total population of the village is about fifteen thousands. This village consists of the highest number of emigrants in the district. There are approximately two hundred families, which have sent at least one member abroad. However among the emigrants, all are not married. With regard to the objective of the study, therefore, we examined only those migrants who married before their migration. There were about 80 married migrants available in this village, scattered in five 'Paras' (neighborhoods).

### 1.2 Methods of data collection

Structured interview was used as the primary method of data collection. In total, 50 migrants were purposively selected as the respondents for the interviews from five 'Paras' (neighborhoods) proportionately. Besides, unstructured interviews and Focus Group Discussions including the family members of migrants and their neighbors were also conducted to ascertain a comprehensive understanding of their remittance practice and its various implications. Furthermore, personal observation was used to complement the findings.

### 1.3 Indicators of social status

In this study, social status of the migrants and their families has been measured on the basis of the following five criteria:

- Changes in the household civic amenities after migration
- Development in relationship between the migrant families and the local elite (educated and financially rich families of the village)
- Development in relationship between the migrant families and the local bureaucrats (both govt. and private officials)
- Involvement of migrants or their family members in local politics after migration
- Involvement of migrants or of their family members in various community organizations (Mosque committee, Eidghah committee, Sports clubs, Gram Samittee etc.) after migration

## 2. Consequences of remittances

### 2.1 Improvement of life style

Migration brings change in the economic condition of the migrants' families through regular supply of remittances. Better economic condition results in changes in life style, which in turn confers higher status on the migrant families. The development of the economic condition of the migrants' families manifests itself in their better housing condition, new household amenities, food consumption, dresses, interactions with others, transactional patterns and such. Because of their social and cultural implications, the civic amenities play a significant role in changing people's perception and attitude to the migrants' family. Thus, every amenity adds value to the status of the migrants' families. The following table sums up the changes in the possession of civic amenities of the migrants' families:

Table 1. Changes in civic amenity of the migrants' family after migration

Civic amenities	percentage of respondents	example
Increased	72	Building Equipments, TV, VCD, Radio, Cassette player, Ornament, Furnisher, Telephone, Motorcycle, Computer, Fridge
No change	28	
Total	100	

Source: Field survey 2005

It is observed that 72 percent of the migrants' families have improved their civic amenities. These include TV, VCD, Radio, Cassette player, Ornament, Furniture, Telephone, Motorcycle, Computers, Refrigerators and other home appliances. Apart from these, they spend significant amount of remittances for the construction of brick built house, which matters highly for their elevation to higher status. On other hand, 28 percent of the migrants could not develop their civic amenities after the migration. The amount of money they have earned is not enough to save for purchasing these goods after maintaining the regular family expenditure.

### 2.2 Changes in norms, beliefs and ideas

Migrants, living in any overseas countries, acquire new ideas, knowledge, norms and values. Thus, the migrants experience changes in their tastes, motivations and habits. When the migrants come back home, they diffuse these ideas among the family and community members. Even, they change the patterns of consumption, interaction, and behavior after their migration. Available money and new affiliation with local elite, educate persons and politician enhance these changes.

Along with money, the migrants also bring many different goods to their home from abroad. With regard to these goods that the migrants bring or send back home by others, there is an interesting difference: those who migrate to a gulf country, which is predominantly Muslim, bring mostly goods with religious use and significance. And those who migrate to a non-Muslim country usually in Europe bring mostly mundane goods with practical use and no religious significance. These are summarized in the following table:

Table 2. Changes in habit to use foreign dresses, goods and home appliance

Religious status of the host country from the host country	The goods or materials the migrant generally take
Muslim country	ornaments, cosmetics, blanket, electronics goods, <i>Borka</i> (veil), <i>Tosbi</i> , <i>Zainamaz</i> (mat), <i>Surma</i> (kohl), <i>Ator</i> (aromatics), <i>Toopi</i> (cap), and water of Jamjam (well) & other religious artifacts
Non-Muslim country	ornaments, VCD, TV, Rice cooker, Mobile, dress, cosmetics, & other

Source: Field survey 2005

In the table, it is found that goods carried by the migrants of Gulf countries include *Borka* (Veil), *Tosbi*, *Zainamaz* (mat), *Surma*, *Ator* (aromatics), *Toopi* (cap) and such. These religious artifacts contain religious values for people in the home community. On the other hand, the migrants of the non-Muslim, especially European countries are more likely to bring goods which are mostly electronics and home appliance such as VCD, TV, Rice, Cooker, Mobile, dress, Cosmetics and other electronics goods. Although these goods which user value have no religious uses also have social value. These alien goods and the household amenities confer higher status to the migrants' families.

### 2.3 New habits

Most of the gulf migrants have observed that they find significant change in their religious activities. They have developed the habit of saying prayer five times a day, keeping fast, paying *Zakat* while they were in the gulf countries. Those who migrate to Saudi Arabia find opportunity to complete *Hazz* and *Omra*.

Table 3. Change of religious practices in migrants by Religious status of the host country

Religious status of the host country		Change of religious activities in migrants		Total
		Positive change	Negative change	
	Muslim country	24	6	30
		80.0%*	20.0%	100.0%
		82.8%**	28.6%	60.0%
	Non-Muslim country	5	15	20
		25.0%	75.0%	100.0%
		17.2%	71.4%	40.0%
Total		29	21	50
		29.0	21.0	50.0
		58.0%	42.0%	100.0%
		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Field survey 2005

\* Row percentage      \*\*column percentage

The table above shows that 80 percent of the gulf migrants think that they are more involved in religious activities than the time before their migration, whereas 75 percent of the migrants to non-Muslim countries are relatively apathetic in religious activities. They have lost their habit of saying prayers and fasting when they were in overseas countries. On the other hand, 20 percent of the migrants to Muslim countries are less involved in the religious practices. These migrants, in most cases, migrated to Malaysia and Jordan where the government are not so rigid about religious activities.

#### 2.4 Improvement of social status

With the changes in the possessions of civic amenities, patterns of consumptions and newly acquired habits of the migrants and their families, the perception of their relatives and neighbors towards the migrants and their families changes, and thus, elevate the status of the migrants' families. The following table summarizes the opinion of the migrants about their social status gain after migration:

Table 4. Position and social status of the migrants in society

Status of the migrant in the society *	Frequency	Percent
No change	14	28.0
Low Status position	4	8.0
Moderate Status position	13	26.0
Moderately high Status position	10	20.0
High status position	9	18.0
Total	50	100.0

Source: Field survey 2005

.0 - .24: No change in status

.25-.49: Acquiring Low status position

.50- .74: Acquiring Moderate status position

.75- .99: Acquiring Moderately high status position

1.00: Acquiring High status position

The table shows that 28 percent of the migrants and their family members consider their status is unchanged while 8 percent think that they have acquired lower status position in the society. However, 26 percent opined that they have acquired moderate status position, 20 percent acquired moderately high status position and 18 percent acquired high status position after the migration.

### 2.5 Political consequences on community level

Migrants' remittances play significance role in reshaping the political power structure and enhancing the political participation of the migrants in local politics. Here political participation does not refer only participation in national level politics through national elections, but also in community level organizations such as Masque committee, Bazaar committee, Local Council of dignitaries and such. Remittances help the migrants' families improve their social status through attaining economic solvency and new lifestyle that in turn helps them get access to these local organizations. The following table summarizes the patterns of such political participation of the migrants' families:

Table 5. Political attachment of migrants' family members before and after the migration

Political attachment of migrants' family members before the migration		Political attachment of migrants' family members after the migration		Total
		Yes	No	
Yes		7	0	7
		100.0%*	.0%	100.0%
No		35.0%**	.0%	14.0%
		13	30	43
		17.2	25.8	43.0
		30.2%	69.8%	100.0%
		65.0%	100.0%	86.0%
Total		20	30	50
		20.0	30.0	50.0
		40.0%	60.0%	100.0%
		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Field survey 2005

\* Row percentage      \*\*column percentage

Among the people who have direct attachment with local politics, 40 percent are from the families of the migrant. Furthermore, 30.2 percent of local politicians have come from the migrants' families with no experience in local politics before migration. This means, migration experiences have helped about one-third of the migrants' families who are currently involved in politics.

### 2.6 Political consequences on family level

International migration and ensuing remittances flows also have profound impact on the power structure within the family along gender line. More specifically, remittances contribute in restructuring of the political structure of the migrants' family wherein the wives of the migrants gain significant authority in the family. The wives, who receive remittances directly from her husbands, enjoy higher position in the hierarchy of the family through her discretionary power over the allocation of money. She regulates the distribution of the resources among the family members and relatives. She supervises the economy, cultivation and other household activities of the family. Her position in decision-making and daily activities of the family elevates her to higher position within the family. This contributes in changing people's attitude and perception towards the wives, too.

All the wives do not receive equal amount of remittances from their husbands. Educational status of the wives plays an important role in drawing remittances from their migrant husbands. Educated (those who attended at list junior high school) wives are better able to handle remittances, for example, to draw checks from the banks and to deposit money in bank accounts. This helps explain the observation that educated wives attain higher propensity to receive remittances from husband through their efficient handling of bank accounts.

There is a positive correlation between the money received by the wives from their husbands and the capacity of the wives to make decision in the family, which is summarized, in the following table:

Table 6. Remittances sent to wives by Contribution of wives in decision making in family

Remittances sent to wives		Contribution of wives in decision making in family		Total
		Yes	No	
	Yes	21	3	24
		87.5%*	12.5%	100.0%
	No	9	17	26
		34.6%	65.4%	100.0%
		70.0%**	15.0%	48.0%
		30.0%	85.0%	52.0%
Total		30	20	50
		30.0	20.0	50.0
		60.0%	40.0%	100.0%
		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Field survey 2005

\* Row percentage      \*\*column percentage

It is observed that 87.5 percent of the wives who receive remittances from husbands abroad contribute in family's decision making. But 65.4 percent of the wives, who do not receive remittances from abroad, do not contribute in decision making of the family.

Receiving remittances by the wives has many repercussions for the emergent empowered identity of the wives. This enables the women to have a fully active role in both the family and the communities. The crucial factor here is whether the wife receives the money directly from her migrant husband. The remittances money helps the woman get empowered only if she receives it directly from her migrant husband without any middleman. This is easily established through a comparative observation of the role of the wives in family for those who receive remittances directly from their husbands and those who do not. Following table summarizes the role of the wives of the migrants in family:

Table 7. Difference in Roles of wives who Receive remittances and who do not

Roles of Wives who Receives Remittances	Roles of Wives who do not Receive Remittances
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Having full autonomy in the family</li> <li>○ Managerial roles in financial, agriculture and business activities</li> <li>○ Provision for dealing outside of the house</li> <li>○ Fully aware of children's health education food and social security</li> <li>○ Provision of having personal properties (both physical and financial)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Passive member of the family</li> <li>○ Under the surveillance of family and community members</li> <li>○ Having no role in decision making</li> <li>○ Confined within the family (isolated both mentally and physically)</li> <li>○ Dependent on the family members of their husband</li> </ul>

Source: Field survey 2005

The daily interactions with the family members, relatives and neighbors performing duties and responsibilities in families by the wives who receive remittances result in some changes in their personal attributions. They, in most cases, handle financial, social and familial issues. All these experiences help them have personal property, develop their managerial aptitude to handle cultivation, business, remittances management and ability to make decision in the family. They become more aware of taking care of their children's health, sanitation, education, food consumption and social security. At the same time, they also take care of health, food and clothing of aged members of the family.

Education and direct access to remittances of the wives contribute in a fully empowered and functioning identity of the wives. The educated wives who receive remittances directly have the high propensity to perform all the tasks personally without taking help from others, especially male relatives. But the illiterate

wives generally perform these tasks with the help of their family members and relatives that limits their independent role.

The receipt of remittances in their own name and entrusting them with responsibility for managing finances are the major factors, which raise the status of, wives and improved their autonomy, independence and expertise in managing their affairs. The husbands' absence also increases economic resources at her disposal. The wife's ability to communicate with her man whenever needed becomes instrumental in transforming the dependent women into self-confident autonomous managers with status equal to men in the family, neighborhood and society.

There is, however, the other side of the wives of the migrants, which involves anxieties, miseries, and various socio-economic problems due to the absence of their husbands. These aspects of the wives are somehow similar to the 'widows'. The Widows lead very isolated, dependent, powerless and destitute lives in the society. Society expects special behavioral patterns, roles and functions from the widow. They have few rights in the family as other housewives of the village. They have no voice in the decision-making of the family. They have to be content with what the family members offer to them. They cannot go out of the family without their permission. They cannot talk to any male inside and outside of the family even if it were necessary. They are kept under the surveillance of the family members of their husbands' family and the community as a whole.

In many cases, the wives of the migrants, especially those who do not receive remittances directly, are treated as widows. Most of the wives spend time by performing religious activities, taking care of their children, visiting the relatives' house, sewing tapestry, watching T.V, and in some cases, staying in fathers' house. They are the 'passive members' of the family. They have no voice in the families. Even in some cases, they are oppressed and treated as maidservants of the family. The worst problem of the wives is that both family members and community members, especially the males, are very suspicious of their moral and sexual purity. Thus, these wives are usually not allowed to talk to males other than very close relatives within the family.

### 3. Conclusion

The impact of remittances on the home community as well as the home country is by now well recognized in the development discourse. However, the primary agents of remittance practices, the migrants' families who receive and spend it remain understudied with regard to the impact of remittances, and when they are considered, focus remains mostly on the economic effects of remittances. However, this study focuses on the political impacts of remittances for the individuals both on the community and family levels.

On the community level, remittances enhance the economic and social status of the individual members of the migrants' families through newly augmented wealth and lifestyle. Newly espoused conforming lifestyle with regard to religion, in association with financial strength, makes the members of the migrants' families eligible for leadership position in various community organizations. Thus, among the migrants' families who have been involved in local politics consolidate their leadership positions with the newly acquired power from remittances and those who have no experience of such participation enter it.

Remittances also have profound political impact within the family that empowers the wives of the absent migrants. With the power from remittances that the wives receive directly from their husbands working abroad, the traditionally dependent housewives effectively claim authority in the decision making process within the family and occupy considerable discretionary power. This enhances women's voice both in the family and the community. The women who receive remittances directly from their husbands can decide independently over many aspects, for example, education and healthcare of their children and enter public life by means of their ability to allocate money and other benefits and thus drawing assistance from others. However, education of these women plays the most decisive role in such empowerment.

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