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NEGOTIATING RELATIONSHIPS AND INTIMACY: BANGLADESHI FEMALE MIGRANT WORKERS IN MALAYSIA

ABSTRACT

This paper will review the context of female Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia. The paper begins by reviewing position of women in Bangladeshi society. This exploration points to the possibilities of a negative reputation when women do venture overseas to work. Then the paper investigates the historical background of Bangladeshi migration to Malaysia. This investigation shows that migration is a highly gendered discourse in both countries. Moreover post-modern policies in Bangladesh and Malaysia have problematized ‘women workers’ in many ways. The paper will then detail the methods used in this research and how they are culturally and gender sensitive to the needs of women. Importantly the paper points to how different information and communication technologies (ICT) make it possible for women to develop various relationships. While the paper is based on early stage ethnographic research and preliminary finding it does point to gaps in our understanding of the lives of migrant women and concludes with a strong call for further research into their lives.

Context:

The context of this research is a globalising Asia, where Asians are moving throughout the region with greater fluidity and frequency than decades past (Chandra 2010; Jones 2009; Rahman 2009; Bhagat 2008; Khondker 2008; Douglass 2006; Rahman and Fee 2005). The study understands that migration may be done as a sole individual or with others/family and may reflect both short and long term plans. This research also recognises that migration journeys are complicated by status, and that both men and women migrate within and throughout Asia for different reasons. These include migration for employment and school, migration to fulfil familial and personal goals, as well circumstances of forced migration.

Embedded in these primary reasons are the relationship possibilities that migration can afford. Some migrants, especially single migrants and those away from their families, envision using their time away from home to live out their Bollywood and Hollywood inspired friendship, romantic and sexual fantasies (see Jones 2009; Saggurti, Schensul and Verma 2009; Mishra 2004). Others look to migration as an opening to live out identities that are suppressed or forbidden back home (see Manalansan 2006; Drummond 2005). Still others are purposely guarded against the possibilities of developing new close relationships on their migration journeys (see Rahman 2011; Dannecker 2005a; 2005b; 2005c).

Migration, however, may not always hold the possibilities for accessible, safe, or even legal, relationships across Asia. In India I have shown how romantic relationships can be culturally inappropriate and risky for migrants in the slums (Chakraborty 2010; 2009). In Singapore pregnancy amongst female working migrants results in immediate repatriation (Lam, Yeoh and Huang 2006; Rahman and Fee 2005). Meanwhile in Malaysia Gomes (1999) has explored how Bangladeshi men may be arrested or even deported if found engaging in non-marital relationships with locals. The legalities of intimacy in Malaysia furthermore prohibit sponsorship of spouses, which puts added pressure on one's intimate life. To add to the complexities of relationship-making, the cultural context of mixed-sex mixing, especially amongst unmarried people, can be inappropriate and even prohibited in certain communities in Malaysia (Bong 2011). It is within this context ongoing ethnographic research with 50 migrant working women from Bangladesh is being conducted (since June 2012).

There has been considerable attention towards the experiences of male Bangladeshi migrants in Malaysia, especially around remittances and identities (see Abdul-Aziz 2001; Dannecker 2005a; 2005b; 2005c; Chin 2003; Gurowitz 2000; Sarkar forthcoming). Similarly in Singapore (Rahman 2009; Rahman and Fee 2004) male Bangladeshi migrants are subject to intense public

discourse surrounding their mobility, status and legality. There has also been much interest in the romantic behaviours of these migrants (see for example Woffers et al 2009; Chakraborty 2010; 2012). Public discourses and policies around the controlling and monitoring the behaviour of migrants – through mobility restrictions, pregnancy tests and STI testing, for example – certainly reflects the social anxieties around migrant bodies. These discourses also intersect with statuses such as class, gender, religion, culture, education and legality of residence.

Little, however, is known of female migrants from South Asia to South East Asia, in particular female Bangladeshi migrants in Malaysia (see exceptions in Dannecker 2005a; 2005b; 2005c; Ullah 2007; Migrant Forum 2011). How many Bangladeshi women are here in Malaysia? What areas of employment are they engaged in? How do they maintain relationships while isolated from their communities? How do they negotiate their working identities? Why are they so invisible? According to the Bangladeshi Embassy (2012) there are 1729 females workers are based in Malaysia, but their lives are virtually unknown.

This paper fills a critical gap in our existing knowledge of Bangladeshi female migrants' lived experiences. The research will inform social and health services, migrant support agencies and other relevant services providers in Malaysia, and inform both public health and social inclusion policies.

Bangladeshi women and mobility:

Bangladeshi females coming to Malaysia for work often do so by challenging normative expectations of femininity. In the traditional patriarchal setting of the Bangladeshi family, growing up as a female child may carry with it lesser privileges when compared with the male

child (see Rosario 1992; 2006). For example, females are expected to perform domestic duties, and in many families this may limit their access to employment outside of the home, and education. This traditional patriarchal society affects men and women differently, and can influence access to, for example, education, health, and political representation. But if statistics on literacy and life expectancy are to be used as indicators of gender equality, then the life situations of females in Bangladesh are changing. Census Bangladesh reports that in 2004, for the first time, more than 77 per cent of women in the nation were literate. Yet many scholars argue that the cultural norms of the country continue to reassert traditional gender roles in the face of great economic and social change. In spite of greater literacy achievements the mobilities of women are still monitored and their freedoms are limited compared to men.

In Bangladeshi society, women are governed by social and cultural customs which often pertain to sexual behaviour and sexual regulation (Rosario 1992)). Frequently driving a woman's actions is the constant overarching thought of *izzat* (honour/integrity/self-respect), which places considerable emphasis on women as the guardians of family integrity. *Izzat* is concern for the entire family, but women shoulder most of the responsibility for it, as seen recently in a study of South Asian women in the UK:

[Izzat] is not about yourself, it's about your family, it involves your relatives and the people you know, so it's like you don't only think about yourself, you've got to think about what other people are going to think as well. I think that is the main issue (Gilbert, Gilbert & Sanghra 2004: 116).

Families in Bangladesh are preoccupied with their reputation and honour. 'Saving face', 'protecting honour', 'good reputation' and 'good family' are some of the common expressions of this preoccupation that occur in everyday language in India. Women and girls are the keepers of *izzat*, as most concerns of honour are entangled with female sexuality and conduct. In most

South Asian societies this means a girl should remain a virgin before marriage (Abraham 2001; 2002; Jejeebhoy 2000; 2006; Kabeer 1994; Rosario 1992), while in other conservative places in India it can mean that girls must practice *purdah*. *Purdah* is the ritual separation between men and women. Feldman and McCarthy define *purdah* in the context of Muslim Bangladeshi women as:

[A] pattern of exchange between the sexes. The pattern includes an internalized acceptance, by both men and women, of the social subordination of women *vis-a-vis* elder male and female family relations and non-family social exchanges. This variant of *purdah* is rooted in selected Islamic doctrines and is culturally specific as well. Its expression includes a rigidly structured division of labor, the exclusion of women from visible social roles, and—dependent upon class and status considerations—the wearing of a *burkha*. This represents a culturally and historically specific form of the social control of women (Feldman & McCarthy (1983: 949).

This interpretation is relevant to the *purdah* practiced in many parts of Bangladesh, in rural and urban areas. Feldman and McCarthy describe *purdah* as also being practised on a woman's body in the donning of the *burqa* or *niqab*ⁱ. In the *burqa* the women's body has been circumscribed with the burden of carrying the national culture and the *izzat* of her entire family. However, the *izzat* obtained/maintained from practicing *purdah* (and especially if the *burqa* is taken) is seen as a woman's greatest honour. So strong is this *izzat* that many societies practice *purdah* even if it impacts upon women's socio-economic status (Amin 1997). In her study amongst women practicing *purdah* in Bangladesh, Amin shows that a woman's seclusion, her inability to access public paid employment and the role she assumes in the home show little responsiveness to poverty, and that *purdah* can actually worsen women's socio-economic condition in some situations (Amin 1997: 213). There is no doubt that these interpretations of Islamic texts and social traditions on *purdah* are orthodox in nature, but on the ground in Bangladesh *purdah* and

izzat are also important concerns for society. So much so that many women, before migrating for work, have scarcely left their homes to go to the city or even neighbouring towns on their own.

Purdah in Bangladesh means that men and women occupy different geographical spaces and women's voices should not be heard, especially in the presence of men. In public spaces, as women use back alleyways (*goli*) and wear the *burqa*, while men usually use the larger public streets. In the private space of the home, *purdah* is performed by women and men occupying distinct spaces. The anxiety over *izzat* played out in the form of strict control over women and girls in Bangladesh is a reaction to shame and honour of the family. As a female's *izzat* is of family concern, male and female family members, as well as neighbours and friends, all play their part to ensure a young girl keeps her *izzat*. Furthermore, knowledge of *izzat* is seen as inherent, so ignorance is not a legitimate excuse to defend error. Thus the onus of *izzat* is placed on women, reinforcing double standards on their mobility and expected responsibilities. In Bangladesh this means more freedoms for a boy child to play, work and socialise outside of the home.

Public employment can be transgressive, but the problematic nature of these activities is being complicated in a globalizing Bangladesh where poverty is a reality. Across Bangladesh many girls and young women continue to be streamlined into household duties and home-based work in favour of higher schooling and public employment. In the last decade, however, Bangladesh has seen impressive increases in literacy rates, particularly women's literacy. Primary school completion and secondary school enrolment is slowly becoming a normative practice in these slums. In fact the slums are facing a new kind of dilemma of late - that of increased education enrolment and completion rates amongst young women compared to their male peers (UNICEF 2008). While education and literacy rates are improving converting female education into

participation in organized/formal public employment is lagging. When young single women do work they tend to join their married peers in home-based work (Amin 1997).

Home-based work is an example of both men and women's ability to restrict the public mobilities of women. These restrictions may have little connection with the desire to maintain *purdah* for solely religious reasons. Rather they represent complicated patriarchal and social norms which favour control over women. Radhakrishnan (2011) for example, shows how home-based piece work in the middle-class information and knowledge sector in India further constrains the transgressive possibilities of women's participation in formal employment. In this research women engaged in migrant work are very visibly transgressing normative expectations of the 'good Bengali woman'.

The dominant discourse around home-based work throughout Bangladesh suggests that working from home allows Muslim women to keep *purdah*, while attending to the needs of the family. The most common home-based work is piece-work, as Amin has described (1997). Women who engage in this work report that it is monotonous, boring and not without its affect to one's mental and physical health, and self-esteem (Kabeer 1994). Home-based work, however, can maintain *izzat*. A lack of child-care and homemaking responsibilities makes home-based work ideal for women, but she also alludes to how public mobility is tied to dominant constructions of femininity and masculinity. Women who work in public challenge the norms of a successful woman as wife and mother, and a successful man as an adequate provider. Home-based employment, although often exploitative, tedious and hidden, allows a family to maintain a public face of women being committed homemakers and men being dominant earners.

Females in South Asia are socialised from an early age to regard relations with those of the opposite sex who are not members of the family as inappropriate. Separation of sexes is very difficult in the public work space, and thus many women are stigmatised by their families and

their peers for working outside of the home. In patriarchal societies like Bangladesh morality has two genders, and we can understand stigmatisation of women who work outside of the home as double standard of employment morality. It is this double standard that accounts for the stigmatisation of women who leave their homes to work overseas, and Dannecker (2005a. Read also 2005b; 2005c for further information) reports, compared to poor women who stay at home in Bangladesh and 'adjust' with their poverty (Amin 1997; Kabeer 1994; Rosario 1992). The moral panics or reactions of the population to the exaggerated perception that women are leaving their homes and are being 'spoiled' has created an overly-protected lifestyle for many female Bangladeshis. This has resulted in the strict supervision of females in public, which makes paid employment outside of the home incredibly problematic. As she embodies both the shame and pride of an entire familial unit she is watched carefully, and if she 'steps out of line' her mobility is curbed.

But often in many poor Muslim communities women may find themselves forced to leave *purdah* to provide for their family. Rajan, Danraj and Lalita's 2011 exploration of Muslim women's public identities after the 2002 Gujarat riots details the pressures Muslim women experience when engage in public work, socializing and community building. They show how hurtful accusations about their public identities and loose morals can come from both men and women who view public work outside of the home as immoral and dangerous. Thus for many Muslim women working outside of the home employment must be anchored to honour - which includes honourable dress, keeping faith and practicing modesty. Practicing modesty in one's public employment, however, is complicated by the nature of work. Class is also an important status which underpins these immoral discourses, with public participation in rag-picking a visible sign of one's low class status. Like informal public employment, paid formal sector work is equally strained by concepts of honour, femininity, mobility and class. 'Modern' associations with men, physical movements and dress, particularly in knowledge sector work, are equally

problematic for women to participate in formal sector work. While working women may see female employment outside of the home as desirable and a ticket out of the '*purdah*-poverty' trap (Amin 1997) another reason to work abroad is to participate in the growing middle class consumer sector.

Policy Changes:

According to the Bangladeshi embassy in Malaysia there are 1729 female workers in Malaysia, and most are within an age range of 28-35, and are from poor families. Given the stress of poverty in Bangladesh, Dannecker (2005a; 2005b) reports that women more than ever are leaving their home to go overseas to work. Women who are poor are likely to be low-skilled workers, and thus go overseas for perceived low-skilled jobs such factory work. There is also a small portion of skilled migrants and they are working in the technology or nursing fields in Malaysia. These numbers are small and do not compare to the tens of thousands of skilled and unskilled workers in the Middle East. Unlike other labour surplus countries, Bangladeshi female migrants make up a low proportion of labour migrants throughout the world. According to NGO collaboration Migrant Forum (2011), since 2004, only 1% of Bangladeshi labour migrants were female. According to the Bangladeshi Economic Review 2008, more than 5.5 million Bangladeshis work abroad sending billions of dollars home in remittances. Six percent of them, or 330,000, are women and thus they still represent a small minority in relation to overall Bangladeshi migrant flows. This is due, in large part, to policies in Bangladesh that have discouraged female labour migration and stigmatized women who have challenged traditional gender roles and migrate for work.

In the early 1970s the government of Bangladesh did not have any concrete policy either to encourage or discourage female migration. Women began to take jobs in the Middle-eastern countries through the use of middle-men or recruiters. The NGO Migrant Forum (2011) explains

that in early 1981, through a Presidential Order in Bangladesh, certain categories of female workers were barred from migrating overseas for employment. The Order stated that professional and skilled women could migrate as principal workers but semi-skilled and unskilled women could not go overseas without a male guardian. The measure was justified on the grounds that it protected the 'dignity of woman'. In 1988 the government slightly modified its position. Dannecker (2005a; 2005b) reports that Bangladeshi women were hardly employed outside the domestic sphere before the 1980s. Export-oriented industrialisation and policy changes reversed these figures. Employment first became common for women in the garment sector (Kabeer 2000, Dannecker 2005a; Ullah 2007), and women began to go overseas to work in Malaysia in the 1990's. Interestingly women were not allowed to enter the country as domestic workers. Dannecker explains that, 'the Malaysian government argues, somewhat absurdly, that Bangladeshi women lack the necessary competence because of their national background. This regulation, however, makes Malaysia the preferred country for migrant women from Bangladesh to work in low-skilled factory work. They expect formal sector employment to be safer and to provide higher incomes' (2005a: online).

But again in 1997 the government of Bangladesh re-instated a ban on women travelling alone for work. The NGO Migrant Forum (2011) shows that in November 1997 Bangladesh re-imposed a complete ban on migration of women except those who were highly qualified professionals such as doctors, engineers and teachers. This policy put a ban even nurses, and skilled workers such as garments or factory workers – a large bulk of migration at the time. This policy shift was again rationalized as a protective measure, to keep women's modesty and to 'protect their honour'. Policy changes again in 2002 and 2006 made it easier for low-skilled women to migrate, resulting in steadily increasing numbers of female migrants. While the Middle East has been accepting female migrants from Bangladesh in certain sectors such as nursing and factor work since 1997 – South East Asia has only seen female Bangladeshi

migrants arrive in large numbers since 2007, and there are now almost 2000 female migrants in the country. These women are mostly living in Klang in single homes which are supplied by their employer. These homes have been rented out/bought out by the employer and have many women living under one roof. Over 15 women to a single house creates a dormitory situation with women sharing close domestic space together. For some women employers have in place a shuttle service to and from work. Not all women live in these situations. Some women live on their own in apartments, or with flatmates. A handful of women live with their boyfriends in Malaysia. This latter group of women are able to write their own independent biographies a lot more easily than women in dormitory-style housing. Within both of these contexts women find ways to develop relationships and sustain intimacy. By intimacy this study understands close emotional and/or physical connections that are undertaken to maintain a relationship. In this research we see, very strongly, that intimacy is developed, formed and sustained are through ICT, especially mobile phones.

Technology and Migrants:

The role of the mobile phone and text messaging play a pivotal role in moving forward relationships, especially where freedom of mobility, socialising or meeting in real-time may be limited. Contemporary Southeast Asian researchers have shown that ICTs are increasingly becoming a part of the everyday lives of people from various socio-economic profiles. In particular the growing importance of mobile phones and internet-based communications are changing the ways Asians, as global householders (Douglass 2006), communicate with each other and with the rest of the world (see Perkins and Neumayer 2012).

The normative nature of mobile phone use and ownership in Malaysia is well known (Nasir and Jomhari 2008). In Malaysia the status of mobile phone ownership has been replaced by status associated with mobile phone branding, a rich indication of the quotidian position of this

instrument. Although phone ownership can be a status symbol for Bangladeshi those from a lower socioeconomic profile (as Rahman and Fee 2005 have shown in Singapore) even amongst marginalised migrants in Malaysia phone ownership and multiple SIM cards are normative (Sarkar, forthcoming).

The changing world of communication in Asia is certainly reflected in the way relationships develop – especially amongst migrants who may be disconnected from their normative social-scapes. Research available describes how ICTs play a critical role in the social and communication strategies of South Asian migrants. In India I have shown how online dating amongst first and second generation migrants in the slums is a growing occurrence (Chakraborty 2012). In Singapore mobile phones are a critical way social communities are developed and maintained amongst South Asian foreign workers (Thompson 2009; Qiu and Thompson 2007; Rahman and Fee 2005). Mobile phones also play an important role in staying in touch with family as well as opening up communicative relationships with local residents (Gomes 1999).

The role ICTs play in relationship-making in Asia is a poorly developed area of research, but scholarly attention on the everyday experiences of intimacy, romance and sex amongst marginalised populations is a growing field of study (see Yeoh and Huang 2010; Grover 2010; Chakraborty 2012; Kitiarsa 2008; Mody 2008). These studies address a clear Western bias in documenting the lived experiences of love, sex and romance. In their classic critique into researching love Janowiack and Fischer (1992:149) argue that the ‘study of romantic (or passionate) love [in the South] is virtually nonexistent due to the widespread belief that romantic love is unique to Euro-American culture... underlying these Eurocentric views is the assumption that modernisation and the rise of individualism are directly linked to the appearance of romantic notions of love’ (1992:149). Theories linking individualisation and risk, argued prominently by Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991), put forth that in a globalising world

individualised romantic love grows to challenge the dominance of heteronormative communal social systems, like the joint family systems of many South Asian communities. Individualised romance is inherently risky in these societies. Self-directed intimate paths can face multiple oppositions, and carry with it real risks such as violence, ostracism, slander and prison.

Though many scholars in the global South dismiss the Western-centric ideas of individualisation (and its accompanying risk), it is important to consider a more nuanced approach to these theories. The potential of meeting and choosing one's own mate through migration, or engaging in affairs or alternative relationships during the migration process, adds to the complexities of changing relationship and marriage practices in Asia. These are risk-laden projects and risks are multiple and layered in the context of a Malaysian nation that views foreign migrant workers as 'outsiders'. Thus the framework of this research is not only underpinned by growing discourses of individualisation and risk in the global South, it also hinges on the importance of migration and cross-country communication in complicating the growth of more individualised lives in South Asian communities. Thus Douglass' (2006) work on global householding in Asia, which argues for the reconfiguration of family and household arrangements due to migration in a globalising world, will be another lens to analyse ICT use and relationship-making amongst migrants.

The research so far:

Our ongoing research with migrants point to the multiple identities that migrants live in their daily lives. There are 1729 female migrant workers in Malaysia. Most are between the ages of 28-32 and a majority are married. While there a handful of women throughout Malaysia, such as in Sarawak and Klantan , most are located in urban centres in Malaysia: Malacca, Penang and Klang and Kuala Lumpur. Most of the women who have come to Malaysia have come to work in semi-skilled (factory and garment work) and skilled (computer and nursing) professions.

According to the Embassy female workers experience fewer issues in Malaysia than male migrants. ‘Unlike men who often have contract issues and payment irregularity we have little experience of women facing this’. The reality of this statement is to be investigated in this research, but one can read this statement with a critical gendered lens. Migrant working men in Malaysia are a highly mobile group, as Sarkar (forthcoming) has explored in her thesis. While they may have mobility restrictions, their mobility within a patriarchal Malaysia are not nearly as limited as women. Visiting the Embassy and negotiating these public spaces can be tricky for some women. The fear of complaining, the fear of violence, the marginalization of women’s voices has been written about in a multitude of studies looking at the lives of female migrant workers in Asia (fill in).

Migrating for work also takes place within a patriarchy – a Malaysia and Bangladeshi patriarchy. So the systems of oppression that exist for women in these spaces are replicated in the migration process. For example Dannecker’s (2005a) interviews with men show that men are responsible for projecting the image of migrant women were being immoral in Malaysia. Men will typically argue that female migrants have contact with men, that they do not dress properly and that they spend their money for consumption instead of sending it home. Men can use this discourse to paint a particular picture of women, and these have specific consequences for women. In Malaysia this may make women experience greater insecurity as migrants. An example from our research is a woman who was targeted by ‘a jealous Bangladeshi boy’ (Anon). A male acquaintance of a single female living in Malaysia filed a complaint to the Bangladeshi embassy against the woman for illegal activities. The case was investigated and it was determined that the woman had done nothing wrong. Rather the man was jealous of the rejection by the female, and friendships she undertook. He wanted ‘to make her life hard’ (Anon) and ‘threaten her by kicking her out (of Malaysia)’ (Anon). By seeking to have her visa

revoked the man practiced a violence that has been discussed in the domestic context of Bangladesh.

The power of ownership and control over women's bodies by men is a normative aspect of patriarchal Bengali society (Kabeer 1994). Men use violence to punish working women (Amin 1997) and use threats of taking multiple wives to coerce women into behaving a particular way in the home. In a migration context the fabric of this violence remains steadfast– in this case the man tries to exert his dominance over this woman's mobility and lifecourse by getting her kicked out of the country.

Another preliminary finding very strongly highlights the importance of mobile phones in the lives of migrant workers. The phone represents more than a communication tool – it is a symbol of class status, and a link that reaffirms and challenges their marginalized position as migrant workers in Malaysia. For workers the mobile is a lifeline to family abroad as well as an important tool to connect with friends, work and partners. On the flip side the phone is also used as a tool for monitoring women's behaviours and mobilities and is a way that the Bangladeshi patriarchy continues to repress women in Malaysia. With family members demanding constant communication and updates multiple phones are a way for women to win time and space to pursue an identity that is for 'Malaysia only'. In Malaysia it is not uncommon for workers to own more than one mobile, and to have two SIM cards operating simultaneously. Multiple SIMs and multiple phones allow workers to achieve uninterrupted communication, while managing multiple identities – one phone can be used to communicate with family, while another phone can be saved for friendships, employment and local communications, and romantic relationships. Given the importance of the mobile in the everyday lives of migrants, the mobile phone is an important tool in our research.

Mobile phones with cameras and individual SIM cards are used in this study. Participants received these tools so that through the phone women shared with us examples (actual or fictitious) of SMS messages they sent to partners, friends and family. These messages allow us to discuss the way communication is maintained and the languages used when speaking with family, partners and friends. Women can also use the camera built into the phone to participate in photovoice exercises where friends, partners, safe and non-safe spaces, places visited and future desires were all captured and shared with us. The phone allows access to spaces off limits to researchers. It gives participants a measure of control of what private and risky information they wish to share. Mobile phones, like cameras and other forms of technology, also increase women's cultural capital in some spaces. With multiple phones, and camera phones, young women's technological skills are elevated, especially when viewed by peers with single and non-camera phones.

Thus far this paper reviews the social construction of Bangladeshi women in Bangladeshi society and the political context of their lives as migrants in Malaysia. The research that is briefly described here represents preliminary findings of the study. One tool used in this research is the mobile phone as window into the world of women's lives. Because of privacy and access to space, mobile phones with cameras are able to breach spaces that researchers have difficulty negotiating. The phone as a tool works well as a qualitative method tool because of the importance of the mobile phones play in the everyday experiences of women. The phone is a lifeline to family – but also a tool to maintain patriarchal practices like monitoring women and disciplining them. Multiple phones and other strategies allow women to negotiate their desires and identities. More than a communication device, the phone also increases women's cultural capital amongst peers, as well as with family back home. Multiple phones, texting proficiency, newer models of phones and technological ability all work to build one's technological savvy.

Through mobiles many women also sustain and develop relationships that may be considered risky – with larger groups of friends, and with men both in Malaysia and Bangladesh. The phone allows users to communicate, build and develop relationships, plan to spend time together and can provide almost constant access to people. Women who live in restricted environments in Malaysia – monitored housing, for example – use the mobile to carve out space for themselves. Another finding reveals how women negotiate multiple patriarchies – the patriarchy of Bangladeshi society and the patriarchy of the Malaysian state. Both of these paternal and dominating figures demand that women behave in a certain way and they act to restrict and control women’s mobilities. Women have to navigate through these controlling mechanisms to live out multiple identities in Malaysia. Obviously our research is only at the very preliminary stages at the moment. Further research in this area will reveal the details of women’s negotiations. It will highlight the lived experiences of women and how they develop relationships and intimacy; their thoughts on their migrant lives and identities they are carving out for themselves in Malaysia.

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ⁱ The *burqua* is a long gown and veil covering the entire face, while the *niqaba* is a long robe that covers the body. A woman's hair can then be covered by a *hijab*, or scarf.