TRANSFORMATION OF WOMANHOOD THROUGH MIGRATION

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Introduction
This paper presents findings from the first phase of a Nuffield Foundation-supported study examining the lives of Bangladeshi women living in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. The focus of the research is on women in the 35-55 age group who migrated to Britain from Bangladesh from the late-1970s onwards. A number of issues were identified about this group which indicated the desirability of further research. These may be listed as follows:

1. Little is known about the range of responsibilities that women may carry within the family group.
2. There is limited knowledge about the way in which roles may be changing for Bangladeshi women, especially for second and later generations.
3. Women may experience caring in conditions of deprivation and social isolation.
4. Women may be subject to domestic violence and abuse that may go unrecognised within and beyond the community.
5. The migration histories and experiences of Bangladeshi women have gone largely unrecorded in the research literature.
6. There may be significant social policy implications arising from a focus on the experiences of women in the 35-55 age group.

Given this background, the research has identified five main research questions to be explored in the study:

1. What experiences are associated with transnational migration?
2. What changes in identity are emerging among Bangladeshi women?
3. What coping strategies do the women adopt in response to changes in their roles and responsibilities?
4. What experiences of providing care do these women have and what kind of formal and informal support do they receive?
5. What is the relationship between the target group of women (35 – 55 years) and younger women?
These questions have been explored in a variety of pilot investigations carried out from March 2000 to spring 2001. They have helped form the basis for the main part of the study, this comprising interviews with 100 women aged 35-55 being carried out over the summer of 2001. The purpose of this working paper is to review and highlight some of the main themes arising from the initial research with community organisations, focus groups, and individual Bangladeshi women in Tower Hamlets.

**Background to the research**

Research on (or including) the Bangladeshi community has come from a variety of sources, these including Census data (Eade, Vamplew and Peach, 1996), the National Ethnic Minorities Survey (Modood et al., 1997), analysis of large data sets such as the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and General Household Survey (GHS) (Evandrou, 2000; Zorlu, 2001; Dale et al., 2001a and 2001b), and locality-based ethnographic research (Eade, 1997a,b; Gardner, 1998; Khanum, 1994; Phillipson et al., 2000), and research on health and social care issues (Nazroo, 1997; Silveira and Ebrahim, 1998). The 1991 Census confirmed that the Bangladeshi population in Britain had a number of characteristics that marked them out from other South Asian groups. According to Eade, Vamplew and Peach (1996: 151): ‘This distinctiveness relates to the rapid and continuing growth of the Bangladeshi population, the very high proportion of young people, the large family size, the concentration of residents within Greater London, and especially Tower Hamlets, the high degree of segregation, the low socio-economic status and the dependence on local authority housing’.

The 1991 Census recorded 163,000 Bangladeshis, with just under half below the age of 16, and around three-quarters under 35. The National Survey of Ethnic Minorities (NSEM) (Modood and Berthoud et al., 1997) carried out in 1994, found 48% of the Bangladeshi respondents under 15; 48% 16-59, and 4% over 60. Another feature of the population profile is the excess of males within the population, with Census data showing 10% more males than females. One reason for this is the different migration history of the Bangladeshis when compared with other groups, with the characteristic pattern of men migrating first and subsequently being joined in Britain (often at a much later date) by their wives. This is a feature of South Asian migration but is particularly noticeable among the Bangladeshis who
were the last to complete the migration of whole families. In line with this, the NSEM found that three out of ten Bangladeshi adults (mostly women and adult children) had arrived in Britain since the mid-1980s.

Bangladeshis are also distinctive in respect of household size, with 60% of households comprising five persons or more, as compared with less than 8% of total households of this size (Eade, Vamplew and Peach, 1996). Large families are thus relatively commonplace in the Bangladeshi community, with more than half of Bangladeshi women in their late thirties having four or more children. The NSEM found that 88% of Bangladeshi couples had children in comparison with 49% of White. Overall, 42% of Bangladeshi families had 4 or more children (9% have 6 or more) compared with 4% of White. On the other hand, Berthoud (2000: 19) notes that the very high levels of fertility may have been reducing in recent decades, and he estimates that the annual rate of teenage motherhood among Bangladeshi women had fallen from 61 thousand in the mid-1980s to 38 per thousand by the mid-1990s.

Census data confirmed the poor living conditions and chronic overcrowding affecting Bangladeshis. Eade, Vamplew and Peach (1996) reported that nearly one-fifth (19%) of Bangladeshi households live at the highest tabulated density category (over 1.5 persons per room), compared with less than 0.5% of the total resident population and 8% of Pakistani households. Berthoud (2000) demonstrates the extent to which very high rates of poverty are characteristic of Bangladeshi households. The combined figure for Bangladeshi and Pakistani families was 50% of working households living below the poverty line (compared with 9% for white households), and 72% for non-working and non-pensioner households (the figure for white households was 43%). Low wages, high unemployment and household characteristics such as family size, are important causal factors. Zorlu’s (2001) analysis of four waves of the British Quarterly Labour Force Survey shows the mean net weekly pay of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis combined as £154.28 (compared with £206.60 for whites). Importantly, barely a quarter (26%) of this group are in medium/high skilled occupations in comparison with nearly one in two (48%) whites. Unemployment and economic inactivity rates remain high for certain age cohorts of Bangladeshis, and for women in particular (LFS data for 1998/9 cited
by Dale et al. (2001b) show economic activity rates of 20% for Bangladeshi women aged 16-59, compared with 74% for white women).

Economic and social deprivation is also reflected in the health status of Bangladeshis, with high rates of limiting long-standing illness (LLSI) and self-reported morbidity. The Health Survey for England 1999 found Bangladeshi men 72% more likely to report an LLSI in comparison with white men; with Bangladeshi women 39% more likely as compared with white women (cited in Evandrou, 2000:22). Cultural factors also play a role in influencing particular health outcomes (Dutt, 1995). For example, the second Health Education Authority Survey of Health and Lifestyles (HEA, 2000) found that amongst women aged 50-74, 92% reported that they had chewed tobacco recently, either on its own or with paan or betel nut. An increased risk of mouth and throat cancers has been associated with this activity (Bedi cited in Evandrou, 2000). Women’s position within the family group may also be an important factor in determining access to health care. Khanum’s anthropological study of Bangladeshi women in a Manchester community noted that the image of women as self-depriving and submissive encouraged them to ‘endure physical as well as psychological stress and to depend upon the household head’s decision regarding her treatment’ (Khanum, 1994:289).

Although the overall context presents a picture of deprivation and hardship, variations by region, social class, age cohort and gender are of major importance. Younger cohorts are likely to present a more optimistic picture as compared with older cohorts, especially in areas such as educational attainment and employment. Dale et al. (2001a), for example, notes the significant increase in degree-level education, with an increase of 83 per cent in applications to University from Bangladeshi women over the period 1994 to 1999. This is also likely to translate into higher rates of economic activity, especially in relation to part-time working. In Tower Hamlets, the context for our own study, there have been significant improvements in the performance of Bangladeshi boys and girls within the school system. For example, the proportion of girls gaining 5 or more GCSE A-C grades increased from 36.6% in 1998 to 44.2% in 2000 (comparable figures for UK white girls were 24.9% and 30%); the figures for boys (white boys in brackets) were: 29.7% (17.6%) and 32.7% (18.1%) (London Borough of Tower Hamlets, n.d.).
On the other hand, some groups of Bangladeshis will continue to experience disproportionate social and economic problems. This is especially likely with those not born in the UK, and who are unlikely to speak fluent English. Dale et al. (2001b) calculate that (taking Bangladeshi and Pakistani women together) for those with no qualifications, who are not UK born, do not speak fluent English and have their youngest child under 5, the predicted probability of economic activity is just 1 per cent. The level of activity rises to 24% for women who are UK born and with fluent English, but have no qualifications and a youngest child under 5. They conclude (2001:34): ‘We may therefore expect a considerable rise in the economic activity of...Bangladeshi women simply as a result of the increasing numbers born in the UK and also speaking English. If such women have a higher qualification, the predicted probability of their economic activity rises dramatically’.

Our focus, on the other hand, is with the important group of women who migrate from Bangladesh to the UK early in their adult life, and who may experience various forms of social and economic exclusion. In the British context, they are a significant group of what are termed ‘transnational migrants’. The relevance of this concept for understanding the lives of Bangladeshi migrants will now be reviewed.

**Gender and the impact of transnational migration.**

An important task for the project has been to situate its work within a research literature able to provide insights into the wider issues facing our target group of women. A starting point has been investigations around transnational migration, as summarised in Kalb et al. (2000), Barot et al. (2000), and Papastergiadis (2000). A general theme of this work is the idea of ‘globalisation from below’, with groups of migrants creating and sustaining what Portes (2000) defines as ‘transnational communities’. Elsewhere, Portes and Bach (1985) have described migration as a process of network building: ‘...which depends on and in turn reinforces social relations across space linking migrants and non-migrants’. This literature draws out the dynamic nature of the ties maintained through different stages of migration. Westwood and Phizacklea (2000: 7) emphasise the 'active decision-making processes of migration and the ways in which economic and cultural phenomena are creatively reinscribed in new settings and the ways in which the diasporic feeds economically and culturally back into the homeland, for instance, through remittances'.
While studies of migration, colonization and class have formed an important context for understanding ethnicity, they have also frequently understated gender. For example, much of the analysis of migration assumed a model either of family migration led by men, or of male pioneers followed by female and younger dependants. Papastergiadis (2000: 62), in his study *The Turbulence of Migration*, develops this point as follows:

‘The… feminization of migration is a growing trend that was overlooked in the early literature. The stereotypical image of the migrant as the ‘male urban peasant’ reflected the mass migrations to the industrial centres of the west in the post-war period. However, this image has little resonance in the context of globalisation with its more turbulent and dispersed streams of movement. The literature on migration must now concern itself more with the relationship between gender and mobility. By focusing on male entry into industrial projects, theorists have not noticed the arrival of women through family migration schemes, and also their key role in the service industries’.

Bangladeshi women have also been a neglected group, with some of the early oral histories in this area (notably Adams, 1987, and Choudhury, 1993) focusing exclusively on men. Yet women migrants play a distinctive role within transnational communities. Khanum (1994) highlights their economic role in strengthening kinship ties (often to the detriment of their own needs). Women will also play a crucial role in the construction of what Hochschild (2000:131) refers to as ‘global care chains’, these representing the ‘personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring’. But migration may also bring major new opportunities for women. Westwood and Phizacklea (2000:108) refer to it as providing an economic and social escape route. And Kelson and De Laet (1999) pose the question: ‘Does international migration provide women with an opportunity for liberating themselves from subordinate gender roles in their countries of origin, or are traditional gender roles perpetuated in the host societies?’

The question raised by Kelson and De Laet is especially apt in relation to our target group, who may experience a complex interaction between strands of liberation on the one side, and those of repression on the other. Vertovec (2000) makes the point
that: ‘Following migration the position of women in families and in the wider community often undergoes considerable transformation’. Ethnicity, interacting with gender, may, however, become a source of positive rather than stigmatised identity. Barot et al. (2000) argue that insofar as young women are concerned, they may play a major role in refusing to see themselves and their cultures as ‘inferior’ or ‘alien’. They suggest that: ‘the second generation’ in Britain has been engaged with reconceptualising and deconstructing ethnicity. This has involved disaggregating notions of ‘Black’ and ‘White’ to explore the situation of women in particular ethnic categories, and also presenting aspects of culture disparaged by white feminists (arranged marriages, wearing the veil) within a framework that treats difference as positive and queries the view of western gender arrangements as more progressive.

By contrast, non-UK born women may have contradictory experiences in relation to reconstructing identity, especially given pressures within the home and family. This was brought out in Khanum’s (1994) research on Bangladeshi women living in a small district of Manchester. She argued that the economic security created by migration had come at the cost of social status within the home and family. Although the position of women in Bangladesh is certainly precarious, Khanum (1994:108) notes the crucial role they may play in agriculture and productive activities within the home, citing data showing a female participation rate in agriculture of 54%. She goes on to argue:

‘[In]…rural Bangladesh women are the key members of a family in terms of class and position. When the women who played this key role in the social sphere on their own at home, migrated to the UK they found themselves in a new sphere of life and society where they have very little to do with the family, social and economic fields. Although the regular receipts from Social Security inflate family income, yet they fail to bring financial liberty and self-esteem. In the majority of cases their rights are not established on these receipts because the money is being handled by husbands and fathers-in-law. These women have been alienated even from the money meant for themselves. Except for a few, the majority of the women experience a sense of isolation and insecurity in spite of their secure economic life in England’ (Khanum, 1994:109).

On the other hand, female migrants may also be viewed as ‘active agents’, making important decisions for and on behalf of their families (Westwood and Phizacklea, 2001). Migration may also have a significant impact on social identity, raising
questions such as: how is identity maintained/reinvented in the new homeland? To what extent are there major changes in the way in which women define themselves in relation to home, family and working lives?

Further questions relate to issues concerning the internal structure of the family and the dynamics of family life. Migration is characterised by a number of centrifugal forces, with people leaving their homeland, often at times of family-building and development. This opens up boundaries between families and leads to the creation of what has been termed ‘transnational families’. Periods of separation may create divisions and conflicts, with the migrant missing out on significant parts of the family life cycle. One example is a male migrant returning home to Bangladesh to visit his wife, but unable to stay until the birth of his child. On the other hand, within the context of transnational families and globalisation, there are photographs, phone calls, video cameras, and e-mail and letters, all of which aid participation in family life (Modood and Berthoud et al., 1997). Networks may, therefore, be sustained in novel ways in transnational families, another important theme for investigation by the project. Before reviewing some of the preliminary findings from our research, we turn to a brief sketch of the history of the Bangladeshi community in the UK.

**The Bangladeshi Community**

The majority of Bangladeshis who migrated to Britain come from one particular district, Sylhet, and through a process of chain migration, a substantial number come from predominantly rural settlements within the region (Eade, 1997a). They speak various dialects and the first generation had a low standard of literacy in standard Bengali. In respect of religion, the majority of Bangladeshis are Sunni Muslims. A small number of Bangladeshis settled in Britain after the first world war, with London the most popular destination. By the 1940s some had started the process of looking for employment in factories and restaurants in different parts of England. Choudhury (1993) records around 400 Bangladeshis from Sylhet living in London (mainly the East End) during the 1940s. He notes that these early job seekers often found employment hard to find, with many moving to the Midlands and the North of England to work in manufacturing industry and textiles. Gardner (1998:509) notes that with the recession of the 1970s and 1980s the process went into reverse, with many Sylheti men coming back to London to seek work in the garment or restaurant trades. They were to be joined in this period by an increasing number of wives and dependents as
well as female partners from new marriages in Bangladesh. By the time of the 1991 Census 53% of the total Bangladeshi population within Britain could be found in the Greater London area, and almost half of this community were located in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. By 2001 28.6% of the Tower Hamlets population were drawn from the Bangladeshi community, and by 1998 a majority (55%) of school pupils in the borough were Bangladeshi.

Bangladeshis have been affected by a number of changes running alongside the experience of migration. Some of the most important of these may be listed as:

- the transition from rural to urban society;
- alternative values and lifestyles;
- changes to the family and kinship unit;
- the impact of racism.

These changes are likely to affect women and men in different ways as well as calling forth different responses from the two groups. However, women themselves are likely to be divided into different groups, in particular: women who came to the UK immediately or soon after marriage with spouse; women who came to the UK after a prolonged time in Bangladesh, but with repeated visits by their spouse; women who came to the UK after a prolonged time in Bangladesh, but with no or few visits by their spouse. Some women may have delayed their arrival to the UK because of commitments to their family in Bangladesh. Women may, for example, have stayed in Bangladesh to take care of a relation before coming to join their husbands in the UK. Exploring the impact of these different experiences on adjustment to migration will be an important aspect of the research. The next section of the paper reports on the work carried out to prepare for the interviews with 100 women aged 35-55 who had migrated to Tower Hamlets from Bangladesh.

The Pilot Study
Initial work on the study focused upon making contact with a variety of community groups working with Bangladeshi women in Tower Hamlets, together with researchers with a specialist interest in the field. Amongst the former were:
- **Tower Hamlets Parents Centre.** This organisation provides education and support to parents throughout the borough both at the centre but also through outreach classes at schools within Tower Hamlets.

- **Jagonari Women’s Centre.** This is a well-established centre with various activities and courses aimed at women in all age groups.

- **Dame Colet House.** Located within the Ocean Estate in Stepney this organisation provides a range of activities for the community, many of these targeted at women.

- **Tower Hamlets Social Action for Health.** This group brings together a number of community health projects with a particular focus on the Bangladeshi community.

- **APASENTH.** This is an advice and support group for Asian people with disabilities and special needs.

These organisations have provided various forms of advice to the project and have assisted with the formation of focus groups and the pilot individual interviews. Leaflets providing information about the study have also been produced and have been distributed around Tower Hamlets (See Appendix One). Separate leaflets have been drawn up targeting specific groups – professionals, women 35-55, and younger women. This was in order to avoid too much information and keep the information meaningful and relevant. The target group leaflets were translated into Bengali and piloted at the Tower Hamlets Parents Centre.

The next phase of the research comprised a pilot study consisting of focus groups with middle and younger generation women, as well as individual interviews. Focus Groups with the target group of women were held at the Parents Centre and Jagonari Women’s Centre. Contact was established with the women at both organisations before they were invited to participate in the groups. Following analysis of the focus group data, an interview schedule was drawn up to conduct individual interviews. The interviews were carried out in a semi-structured format, hence ensuring all the topics were covered, but following the lead of the respondents rather than the interviewer.

Twelve in-depth individual interviews were conducted: four in the respondents’ homes, six at the Parents Centre, and two at APASENTH. The length of the interviews ranged from one to two hours. Ten of the interviews were held with women
in our target age group, two of the interviewees fell outside the age group (where the women were aged 21 and 60), but were included to allow for comparisons of early and new migrations with the main sample. All of the women had children and four were widows. The mean age of the women was 43 years and 9 months. They had lived in the UK between 1 year and 30 years, with the mean length of residency 15 years and 4 months. The interviews provided detailed information about the lives of the women, including their day to day activities, as well as more life changing events, such as marriage and migration. The women spoke of their initial reactions to coming to the UK, how they had adapted to their new life, and to their local community in particular. Following the individual interviews, a focus group with Bangladeshi women aged between 21 and 23 years was carried out to compare and contrast experiences with the older generation of women.

**Women and migration**

Transnational migration is likely to bring a variety of changes to women’s lives, especially as regards their experience of family and community life. Even so, most women will come via established social networks, these often lowering some of the cost and risks associated with migration (Ahmad, 1993; Westwood and Phizacklea, 2000). Conversely, without support networks, movement from one country to another will almost certainly bring considerable stress, especially for those responsible for different kinds of informal care. Even for those with extensive ties, the initial arrival to a new country may bring difficult experiences:

In Bangladesh you all live together. Here I was all alone so I felt bad.
(Ruheli, length of time in UK 14 years)

When I first came here I didn’t like it. I couldn’t go out much, go anywhere. I was scared. I didn’t know how to do things. I wasn't familiar with the area… I didn’t know any of the streets.
(Nargis, length of time in UK 14 years)
That [the early phase of migration] was terrible. It was so lonely. You don’t want there to be no Bengalis [i.e. live in a community where there are no Bengalis], there was nothing. My husband had to come down to London once a week to get our fish and meat.

(Henna, length of time in UK 17 years)

It seemed very sudden. I felt very lonely. In Bangladesh there is always people around. You are never on your own. At first I felt very bad, but then I just got used to it.

(Shazeda, length of time in 19 years)

The absence of networks to support women may be a particular issue in the early phase of migration. Evidence from the work of Burholt et al. (2000) in Tower Hamlets indicates that networks do eventually develop, and that they may in some instances reproduce the characteristics of those encountered in Bangladesh (whilst also producing significant variations as the research of Khanum, 2001, demonstrates). More generally, the existence of kin-based networks (‘strong ties’ to use Granovetter’s, 1973, term) were clearly acknowledged by some of those interviewed:

All my family are here - I go to see them and they come to see me.

(Sunera, length of time in UK 14 years)

My aunt in Cannon Street. I lived in her house when I first came over- so I have always been close to her since I came here.

(Ruheli)

Others created their own highly inclusive networks, these reflecting the importance of fictive as well non-fictive types forms of kinship:

We call our neighbours our relatives-and we will help them just like our own, as if they were our own brothers and sisters.

(Nehar)

And Deba makes a point that would almost certainly apply in a Bangladeshi village:
If you live near me, then aren’t you my relative?
(Deba)

Adjustment to new social norms was also important in the early phase of migration:

In Bangladesh we would never go out in front of people who weren’t family, even if they were my father’s friends. But here even if there are twenty men, we are walking down the street. In this country, men and women all sit around the table together to eat. When I first came over, the suddenness of that experience felt bad. Now I’m used to it.
(Momtaz, length of time in UK 14 years)

Most of the migrant women came from villages where they were in close or daily contact with extended kin. The absence of such a network was felt most acutely by the four widows interviewed, who all reported different degrees of dependence on their husbands in the period following migration. Shireen commented for example:

I was completely on my own. And after my husband died it just got worse. Now, as time goes by I feel that I’m being enveloped by sorrow.
(Shireen, length of time in UK 17 years)

The perception of these widows was that in Bangladesh there would have been more support through the extended family, with brothers and brother-in-laws often taking up much of the duties of the husband regarding shopping and related tasks. This was not always available in the UK, and so women on their own had to learn to fend for themselves:

Today I don’t have anyone to do my shopping, if I don’t do it, how will I eat?
(Sufia, length of time in UK 30 years)

The lack of a confidant for some of these women within their networks, is illustrated in the following comment:
In Bangladesh you don’t get so much stress, so much pressure to your head, it goes to everyone. Everyone shares it. And after coming to this country I am all alone and all that pressure has fallen on me. Today, if I had my mother or sister, or any relative to share a sorrow with then my mind would be open and free. Here I have no-one, they are not near me, so I can’t tell them, it stays with me.

(Henna, length of time in UK 17 years)

This last comment echoes a finding from Khanum (1994) that women in the Manchester community she studied felt themselves to be more dependent and helpless than their counterparts in Bangladesh. On the other hand, Kabir (2001) cites research in Bangladesh suggesting women’s status may be reduced following widowhood. Thus the benefits of being surrounded by a kinship group have to be offset by economic and social marginality which can sometimes accompany loss of a spouse.

**Roles and responsibilities**

If migration brings costs of different kinds, it may equally bring distinctive rewards in respect of greater freedom and new responsibilities. This point was highlighted in a reverse way by Gulati (1994) where she examined the impact of overseas male migration on the women who stayed behind (in a community in the Indian state of Kerala). Gulati’s work suggested that although dependence on the family increased following migration, over the longer term women gained significantly in respect of their own independence. She concluded (1994:144-45): ‘The migration of men breaks down women’s isolation, increases mobility and brings them into contact with a wider network of institutions than were in their purview before. This results in their gaining greater confidence and taking on more responsibilities. Some of them even take on income generating activities…Women of migrant households manage reasonably well in coping with the situations [which they encounter]…Of course, family and other networks, including religious networks, play a generally supportive role. But the major effort to cope with the absence of the male is that of the women immediately affected’.

Gulati’s research is relevant to our own project because many of our target group of women will have experienced lengthy periods of time separated from their
husbands (see below), for example waiting for a spouse to gain entry to the UK, or through joining a partner already established in this country. Either way, women may already have experienced some degree of independence and will have had to negotiate new skills to manage their situation in the community. Arising from this may be opportunities to redefine domestic roles, no longer monitored to the same degree by a dense network of close kin. The possibility of finding new activities is expressed in the following comments:

My husband refused to let me go to the language classes. He said ‘No, you can’t go. You can’t go to work and you can’t go to language classes’. So I said ‘Fine. I will just go to work and not to language classes, but I won’t give up both’… So I compromised on doing one of them, and I worked. He accepted that. Then I asked my boss if I could go to language classes during my work time, then my husband would think I was at work. My boss let me. So I managed to do both!
(Nargis)

In Bangladesh women don’t go shopping, the men folk do the shopping. In this country women do the shopping so you can get whatever you want and eat what you like!
(Aleya)

For some women, change was prompted by the independence of children, this producing a reassessment of the direction their lives were taking. In some cases women would begin to spend more time outside the home, mixing with others in a similar position. Alongside this may come recognition that settlement in Britain was permanent, the idea of returning to Bangladesh neither practical nor (for many) desirable. One response encountered in the interviewers was more involvement in education, and in particular an increased desire to speak English. One of the women in the focus group from the younger generation reported:

I teach English as a second language and I get the majority of the students in my class, like 90% of them are Bangladeshis, and they’re all older women. One of the things is that most of them have been in this country like 15 years, 20 years, but they don’t know English. One of the reasons that they’re trying
to learn English now is that they’ve realised that now their children have grown up, they’ve got to come out of the house in terms of going shopping or taking their children to school.
(Seema)

Many of the women expressed regret not having learnt English before or confining themselves to the home:

That makes me feel really bad, I just think to myself...’What have I been doing? I have been here this long and I don’t even know the language’ then I have to go to someone else for help
(Fatema, length of time in UK 18 years)

I used to stay at home. I wouldn’t go out anywhere. Its only recently, since the last two or three years that I go out - not for any work, but just here and there.
(Deba)

In Bangladesh, women’s roles are defined within the context of a patriarchal society. For one of the respondents it seemed that throughout her life men had been setting boundaries for her:

I wanted to study but my father told me to give up studying. The main school was too far.
(Shalina, length of time in UK 18 years)

And later in the interview this respondent comments:

My husband wouldn’t let me [work], because [he thought] it would be too much strain on me.
(Shalina)

This boundary-setting affected other women in her kin network:
Women don’t work in Bangladesh. My father didn’t even let me study. And even if you do study… I have two sisters who studied up to their A-levels, but their husbands don’t let them work. Their husbands say that: ‘We are working to provide for you, why should you work?’

(Shalina)

One consequence of migration for Shalena was that she had more freedom to define her own role and set her own boundaries. Freed from a patriarchal community organising her life, she was more able to create an equal relationship with her children, and provide her daughters with the opportunities she was denied:

I treat my sons and daughters they same. I think all children are equal and you should treat them that way otherwise you won’t be able to keep your children on the right path. If you prefer your son more than your daughter then that is not good, it’s not Islamic… I wanted to study and to be able to stand on my own two feet, but that didn’t happen. My daughter can do that.

(Shalina)

Redefinition of roles might also come through the experience of widowhood. Many women would only go out of the home with their husbands, and when they were effectively on their own they were forced to acquire new responsibilities. This redefinition of their roles, whilst stressful, could also be positive in that it allowed women more independence:

Before I just used to take the children to school I wouldn’t go out much, I would just stay at home and my husband would do everything. But my husband died in ‘90. So since [that time] I’ve had to do everything. Looking after the children, shopping, everything.

(Shalina)

For some women, on the other hand, migration simply brought a continuation of an existing pattern of responsibilities. One of the women in the study (Sunera) cared for her father-in-law, and his brother in Bangladesh, and only came to the UK after they had passed away. She sums up her new situation in the following way: ‘No one needed me over there, and my husband was ill over here’. For others,
responsibilities are transnational with some respondents caring for relatives in Bangladesh as well as spouses in the UK:

My whole life has been difficult… I have always had to look after people, right from my father, to my father-in-law, to my husband, and my mother... My mother’s medication costs about 800 taka a month. So I thought rather than paying all this money out for her medicine, I would put her in a clinic. Nurjahan Clinic is a very good clinic. It costs 11/2 lakh taka [about £2000] a year.
(Nargis)

The responsibilities that she has undertaken as a transnational carer have redefined her role as daughter. She now fulfils the traditional role of the son as carer of the parent:

My mother says - my seven sons haven’t done as much for me as my one daughter. My one daughter is doing everything for me.
(Nargis)

Personal relationships and transnational ties
Vertovec (1999) refers to transnationalism as a condition in which despite great distances and the presence of international borders, certain kinds of relationships become globally intensified. Relationships are managed despite separation in different countries; economic support from one branch of the family to another flows across different international borders; and the rituals associated with the life course (such as marriage and death) may also span continents. Transnationality therefore affects intimate ties with relationships between spouses, as much as it does the economic flows between families, corporations and countries. In our study, migration as a factor influencing the nature and quality of personal ties will certainly be an important issue, as a number of the pilot interviews made clear. As in Gulati’s (1994) study, women reported negotiating long periods of absence from their husbands, these coming to form a normal part of the relationship. One of the respondents reported that her husband was away in Bangladesh. When asked if he’d been away for long she replied:
No not long. It’s been about 7 or eight months.
(Momtaz)

The respondent was unable to say when her husband was returning. The conventional understanding of relationships would view this as at best as an unusual relationship; dysfunctional even. However, it was common for marital relationships to be sustained with lengthy periods of separation. Visits to Bangladesh were crucial for managing and sustaining transnational ties. Momtaz’s husband had gone to Bangladesh to oversee his land and property. Living in the UK meant that property in Bangladesh was vulnerable:

In Bangladesh you have the harvest, he’s gone to sort that out. Those who live away from Bangladesh, their families often want to take their share in their own names. So he’s gone to sort that out. They will try and claim it as their own. Everything works on bribes, if you slip someone 100 taka they will give it to you. These are the complications.
(Momtaz)

Remittances in the form of financial support are a common feature of transnational ties. Khanum (2001:494) cites a survey carried out by Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council in 1988 that found 269 men out of 695 regularly sending remittances back to their fathers as heads of the households in Bangladesh. From her own study, the researcher found evidence of women (usually without the knowledge of their husbands) making remittances to their natal relatives in Bangladesh (Khanum, 1994:117). Ownership of land (as above) has also been an important medium for maintaining links (although there will be significant social class variations in this regard). Sending remittances could, however, become more difficult as family obligations increased in Britain, a point made by at least one of our respondents:

He has to support his family in Bangladesh as well…. all his cousins and brothers. The whole village is dependent on him. His whole life he has fed them. But now he can’t work anymore, but he still has to look after them. He will go into debt to send money to them, and they have never worked in their
lives. They just don’t understand. He worries about how he is supposed to continue to send money to them.

(Henna)

This may place a strain on marital and family relationships in the UK. The continuing practice of sending remittances was viewed with disdain by many of the younger generation. They recognised that this could place a financial burden on their parents but were critical of the family at the receiving end of the money:

It’s hard for them because you have to protect what you have here and also protect what you have back home. Its true, people are like vultures, when you’re not there, they tend to think that because you’re not there you’re going to forget about it and they’re going to try and take that land away. I know loads of my cousins have that view. They think…well you’re here, you’re rich, you’re earning your money. You should let us have the land’ and even if we don’t give it to them they take it.

(Samina)

It’s not enough that you’re sending money all the time. They want your land as well. They are always asking for money for things, to do up their homes or to start a new business. And you go there and its like’ look we started a rice factory’…Wow, that took all of not even £1,000 [i.e. they exaggerate the cost], but they’ll take more from you. They take a lot of money but they don’t produce anything, because you’re not there to see them.

(Eva)

Equally, there are many positive aspects of transnational communities. By sustaining their community, families retain a sense of kinship and closeness, notwithstanding geographical separation. Within the same family, children born in a remote village may have travelled across the globe, with siblings living in the UK, USA, Netherlands, and the Middle East. Far from creating a sense of loss, this experience can represent an opportunity for individuals to create new lives and careers and to re-define the meaning of ‘family’ and ‘household’ and their own position within these institutions. Moreover, technological advances have increased the ability of the migrant to communicate with all members of their transnational
family, regardless of how dispersed. The more complicated view of ‘home’ associated with these changes has been noted by Eade (1997a:104): ‘...the interviews [in his study] suggest a changing vision of ‘home’ where Sylhet may no longer be the ultimate point of (physical or imaginary) return. Home in the sense of a ‘promised land’ may be found anywhere in Bangladesh or the Middle East where Sylheti migrants may be found. For some individuals it could be in any country which observes sharia, while for others it may be the English countryside, the USA, ‘Asia’ or wherever, ‘as long as they feel comfortable’’. But this point raises complex issues about the sources of identity and allegiance that underpin daily life, an issue that is taken up in the penultimate section of this paper.

Changing identities

In his research on Bangladeshi youth, Eade (1997b: 150) has noted the range of identities (such as Bangladeshi, Bengali, Muslim, British, Londoner, East Ender) which may influence an individual’s sense of who they are and where they belong. In relation to our group, identity emerged in the women’s talk as a multi-layered construct open to modification in a variety of ways. For the first generation of women, coming into an alien and often hostile environment, they did not mix with the host community to any significant degree, thus identity remained relatively fixed. In the case of some women, religious and cultural aspects of identity were crucial:

Well to be Bengali you have to abide by our Islamic faith. We have to follow our faith before the English culture.

(Ruheli)

For others they were discrete synonyms:

I would say that I am Sylheti, Bengali and Muslim. All are equal, none comes above the other… It is who I am. I am Muslim so I have to live a certain way. I am Bengali so I do things a certain way.

(Henna)

On the other hand, religion could play a major role in supporting women’s sense of identity, especially when faced with the challenge of a new group. Warner (cited in Vertovec, 2000:17) suggests that: ‘Religious identities often mean more (but not
Ruheli’s experience brings out this point:

‘I’ve always been Islamic minded—but it increased after coming to this country’.

But this kind of view was also voiced in the focus group of younger women:

I used to go to a youth club- and every time we went on a trip I used to become more Bengali- at home I didn’t used to pray, but when I was out of Tower Hamlets I used to pray, everything - I used to be more Bengali and more Muslim out of the house than when I was at home!
(Seema)

Conversely, one of the reasons for the importance of religion, as expressed by some of the older women, related to the increased time spent alone at home:

There is more time here.  You are on your own in your house so you will pray. There is time for it.  In Bangladesh, there are so many people, you are always busy you just do the basic five prayers, you don’t have much time to read. Here there is lots of time.
(Henna)

Amongst the younger women, entry to University could also emphasise the importance of religion:

When you go to Uni your behaviour is more dictated by your religious beliefs than your cultural beliefs.  When I’m at Uni I don’t drink I don’t eat haram foods, things like that. More people know me as a Muslim, they don’t know that I’m a Bengali or anything like that.
(Samina)

For the younger women, identity is more of an issue because they are growing up with simultaneous exposure to both cultures. Eade (1997:162) makes the point that groups such as young Bangladeshis may be much more aware than ‘experts’ (community leaders, academics, etc) of the ambiguities that characterise social
identity. Such groups: ‘...are attempting to ‘make sense’ of a situation where the fixities of traditional social groupings are challenged by global mobility and where group solidarities are variably constructed through discourses and practices which are not rooted in some familial, religious or national essence’. But whilst younger women were certainly a key group deliberating the meaning of terms such as East Ender, Bengali, Muslim, Londoner, the women in our target group also reflected upon their relationship to these terms. Analysing their responses will be an important element in the main phase of our research.

Conclusion
The purpose of this paper has been to summarise some preliminary observations and findings from a study of Bangladeshi women living in Tower Hamlets. The discussion has focused upon three major areas: first a review of the relevant research about the social and economic characteristics of the Bangladeshi community; second, a summary of the development of the fieldwork for the project; third, a presentation of findings from the pilot interviews and focus groups. Research to date has highlighted the severe economic and social deprivation affecting women and men in the community. Some of the characteristics identified in a range of reports include chronic overcrowding, above average rates of unemployment, high rates of poverty, and high levels of chronic illness. However, the longer-term pattern will be for increasing diversity in social circumstances, a feature already reflected in the educational achievements of younger cohorts.

On the other hand, disadvantage is likely to be a feature of the lives of the target group of women interviewed for this study, in particular those who have migrated (and who continue to migrate albeit in declining numbers) from Bangladesh. Our own research will focus upon the costs and rewards associated with transnational migration. Migration undoubtedly brings its own pressures as our fieldwork has begun to demonstrate. Women find themselves involved in a complex period of transition, in the movement from a rural to an urban existence. Social networks are vital in handling this process, and we would certainly wish to emphasise the positive role transnational families can play in this regard. Yet their influence may be double-edged: providing support on the one side, but limited options for negotiating particular domestic and community roles on the other. The main phase of our study will explore further the range of responsibilities carried by women, especially in
relation to care within the home. We shall also, through our interviews with 100 women, gather information about the stresses experienced in the early days of settling into a new homeland. But some of the rewards of migration will also be considered. Migration represents an escape route from lifelong poverty and under-employment. And some women may experience a transformation in their lives, learning new skills and forming new relationships beyond the home. In this way, migration can be as much about changing social identities as improving economic circumstances. The main phase of our research will consider both these strands in our assessment of the changing lives of Bangladeshi women.

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