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‘It’s just a natural human thing to do, to go and visit your family... but it’s not easy for us’: Gender and generation in Bangladeshis’ transnational visits between London and Sylhet

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Abstract
In the title to this paper, Maya, a British-Bangladeshi woman, expresses her frustration at the refusal of the Home Office to grant her father in Sylhet a visa to come and fulfil his role as family head at the wedding of his son, Maya’s brother, in London. The case illustrates well the intersection of gender and generation that fundamentally shapes the pattern of visits, in both directions, across this long-distance transnational social and family space. Bangladesh is a patriarchal society, with marked gender divisions layered across generations, which are largely reproduced among the migrant community in London and are manifested, in various ways, in the phenomenon of transnational visiting. Based on 61 in-depth interviews in London and Sylhet, supplemented by participant observation, we delineate the gendered and generational structures framing the visits, both of migrants to the homeland and of non-migrants to their relatives in London.

KEYWORDS
British-Bangladeshi transnationalism, visits, gender, generation, patriarchy, Sylhet

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INTRODUCTION

My father wanted very much to come here for my brother’s wedding. He wanted to fulfil his duty as the ‘murobbi’ [guardian] of our family... but he was denied the visa required to visit. We felt gutted, absolutely gutted... Getting someone married off is a big thing in our culture... The in-laws were disappointed and pointed the finger at us, that we ‘kids’ did not have any guardian on such an important occasion.

This quote from Maya, a British-Bangladeshi woman in London, says many things about the interrelations between transnational migration, gender, generation, patriarchy, family roles and visits, all set against the background of the UK Home Office’s ‘hostile environment’ towards immigration, even for perfectly legitimate short-term visits. After all, what could be more legitimate and normal than for a transnationally divided family to reunite for such an important family occasion as a wedding, especially in a culture where weddings are such big and symbolic events? According to Maya, the visa application was refused because the British authorities thought that her father would not return to Bangladesh. She went on to point out the speciousness of that argument: ‘My father had his whole life over there... he would not survive here, he would be like a fish out of water’. In any case, she continued, ‘My mum never wanted to come’.

The now quite extensive literature on migrants’ transnational visits has been reviewed by Janta et al. (2015) and Miah (2022). Such visits take place for multiple, often combined, reasons, including (i) maintaining family and social bonds, (ii) providing care, (iii) to attend important life-stage events such as births, deaths and marriages, (iv) to connect emotionally with one’s homeland ‘roots’, (v) for business purposes and (vi) ‘pre-return’ visits to scope the potential for a permanent return. The visits can take place in two directions: migrants visiting the homeland and non-migrants visiting their relatives and friends abroad. However, this literature makes scant reference to how such visits are gendered. This is the research gap that we attempt to fill. We pose two questions: The first one is general, and the second is more specific. First, how are migrants’ transnational visits gendered, and to what extent are gendered roles and positionalities mediated by generation and life stage? Second, how do these gendered and generational structures and dynamics play out in the British-Bangladesh transnational social field (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004), both for British-Bangladeshis’ visits to Bangladesh and for non-migrants visiting their relatives in Britain?

The paper starts by reviewing the literature on gendering migration and visits. It then highlights the key role of visits in sustaining transnational family life amongst the British-Bangladeshi community, where patriarchal structures and gendered divisions remain strong as they do in Bangladesh. After an outline of our field methods, the main sections of the article present the results of the empirical research on the intersections of gender and generation as they play out in this transnational migrant community. As performative acts, visits are vital to the maintenance of family ties and community solidarity, but they are more important for some members of the community (notably older, first-generation immigrant men) than they are for women and for the second and subsequent generation.

GENDERING MIGRATION, GENDERING VISITS

Gender is now widely mainstreamed into the interdisciplinary field of migration studies (Amelina & Lutz, 2019; Donato & Gabaccia, 2015; Donato et al., 2006; Mahler & Pessar, 2006; Marchetti, 2018; Piper, 2009; Timmermann et al., 2018) but less so in the study of return mobilities (Girma, 2017; King & Lulle, 2022) and arguably even less in research on migrants’ transnational visits. Indeed, to our knowledge, there is no study on migrants’ visits that takes an explicit gender perspective. The key significance of gender in return migration and visits is how such gendered social moments and processes give rise to a remaking of gendered roles and identities, notably restoring masculinity (Thai, 2012).
Several authors trace the scholarship on gendering migration to the 1980s and describe its evolution in three stages (Lutz & Amelina, 2021; Marchetti, 2018). The first wave was concerned with making migrant women visible; in the iconic title of a landmark paper of that era, ‘Birds of passage are also women’ (Morokvasic, 1984), the author was reacting to an influential book published a few years earlier—*Birds of Passage* (Piore, 1979)—which described, from a broadly Marxist viewpoint, the exploitation of male migrant workers by the industrial capitalism of North America and Western Europe. The male-centred ‘breadwinner’ model of labour migration ignored the roles of women, either as breadwinners themselves or as unpaid suppliers of reproductive and family-care labour—and often both. This is not to deny the gender asymmetry of some migration flows, including that from Bangladesh to Britain, where men were far more numerous as economic migrants in the early stages of migration, leading to a family reunion with wives at a later stage.

In a second phase, which Lutz and Amelina (2021, p. 57) call the attributable approach, the distinctive characteristics of female migrants’ patterns and experiences were analysed, especially as autonomous movers and pioneers of family constellations on the move. Stress was laid on female migrants’ agency and independence, albeit often circumscribed by exploitation in racialized sectors of the global labour market for certain types of work, notably in the care and domestic service sectors. According to Marchetti (2018, p. 448), Filipino women came to be regarded as the ‘quintessential protagonists’ of this phase of migration scholarship and of the way that female labour was imbricated in ‘global care chains’.

Since roughly the turn of the millennium, in the third stage, ideas about gender and migration have become more complex and intertwined with other epistemological frames. The link to the female side of migration has been loosened and gender as a relational and intersectional category has been emphasized, including more attention given to the gendered, classed and racialized experiences of men as migrants. A useful theoretical platform for understanding the differentiated but powerfully linked migration experiences of women and men over the past two decades is Mahler and Pessar’s (2001) ‘Gendered geographies of power’, which enables us, later in this article, to compare the migration and visiting experiences of Bangladeshi migrants (and non-migrants) across the British-Bangladeshi transnational space.1

The three conceptual building blocks of gendered geographies of power are transnational geographies, *social location* and Massey’s (1992) notion of *power geometry* or the spatial articulation of relations of domination and subordination. The ‘geographies’ are the various territories and places through which migrants move, including their dwelling places, working environments and family constellations. Social location refers to people’s and households’ positions within hierarchies of power created through historical, political, economic, geographic, kinship-based and other socially stratifying facts (Mahler & Pessar, 2001, pp. 445-446). These positionalities are gendered and have the potential to shift, or be reinforced, across various stages of the migration process, as well as playing out in different ways when transnational visits take place. Such hierarchies are not just articulated around gender but are complexly interlinked with other variables such as generation, age, ‘race’, class, nationality and so on.

Following this brief overview of gender and migration, how are migrants’ visits likely to be gendered and illustrative of the gendered and generational geographies of power? Some clues might be found in the literature on gendering return migration, on the basis of possible parallels between return migration (temporarily or for good) and return visits to the migrant homeland.

Let us assume that migration has taken place from a relatively low-income country that has (for want of a better term) a more ‘traditional’ society with concomitant gender roles governed by patriarchy and gerontocratic structures to a destination country that is more ‘open’, ‘liberal’ and egalitarian for women. The standard argument is that men are more likely than women to want to return-migrate to their country of origin (Girma, 2017; King & Lulle, 2022). This is because men can reclaim their status and power, or even enhance them, by returning to a society where they are more ‘respected’, and even more so as ‘successful’ migrants, whereas women fear losing the relative freedom, independence and equality they enjoyed in the host society. This pattern of return migration as a vehicle for reclaiming masculinity is empirically confirmed in multiple spatial contexts, including Romania (Vlase, 2013), India (Sondhi & King, 2017) and Puerto Rico (Pérez, 2005).
Does this gender contrast apply to return visits? Are women more reluctant to travel to visit the homeland and re-engage with its still-traditional society? Are men keener to do this? How about the intersection with age and the generational divide? Finally, how about visits in the other direction, from non-migrant family members in Bangladesh to their London-based relatives?

**BANGLADESHI MIGRANTS IN BRITAIN AND THE ROLE OF TRANSNATIONAL VISITS**

According to Zeitlyn (2013, pp. 253-254), British Bangladeshis are a classic transnational community, their lives and identities enmeshed in social and economic relations across both countries, the desh or 'homeland' and the bidesh of Britain. London and the Bangladeshi region of Sylhet are the most important locations in the British-Bangladeshi social field, which is bound together by extended networks of family and community across two continents and which have their own logic, rules and values. Of key significance in these transnational social practices are visits. Quoting Zeitlyn again:

The visit is a big event in the lives of most British-Bangladeshi families; they are the source of careful preparation, planning and imagining for many months... Visits to Bangladesh are a crucial meeting place for families... ‘Being there’ and ‘being seen there’, reconnecting with the people and places of their ancestral villages and bringing relatives and neighbours up to date with developments in the family are crucial elements of the visits. [...] Visits can also be about being there at key moments. Weddings, deaths, funerals and religious celebrations are all occasions when a visit might occur (Zeitlyn, 2015, p. 51).

Zeitlyn mentions several motives for transnational homeland visits, to which Gardner and Mand (2012, p. 971) add other reasons: to manage their deshi (homeland) affairs, take a break from their work-dominated lives in the United Kingdom and, for parents, to expose their children to ‘Bangladeshi’ ways of doing things. We build on the multi-purpose nature of visits—in both directions—and stress the way that different types of the visit are gendered.

The Bangladeshi community in Britain is long-established. An initial impulse came from the settlement of colonial seamen who either jumped ship or were abandoned by ship owners in London and other British ports in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Nearly all of these seamen were from the region of Sylhet in northeast Bangladesh (then part of British India). The main inflow of migrants from Sylhet, however, came in the 1950s and 1960s—mostly single men sponsored by their seafaring predecessors (Carey & Shukur, 1985, p. 407). These migrants were recruited to work in factories, including the ‘rag trade’ (clothing manufacturing), notorious for its poor working conditions and low wages. As the rag trade declined due to cheap-labour factories overseas (including Bangladesh itself), many Bangladeshi immigrants switched to the restaurant sector, expanding a specialism already established by ships’ cooks who had settled ashore (Carey & Shukur, 1985).

Referring back to our account of gendered migrations, the Bangladeshi migration to Britain was male-dominated until the early 1970s. Migrant men originally intended to work for a number of years and then return to Bangladesh to get married or rejoin their wives and families. All this changed with the imposition of strict immigration controls through the Commonwealth Immigration Act (1962) and the Immigration Act (1971). The result was that most Bangladeshi men opted to stay in Britain and pursue a legally allowed strategy of family reunification and marriage migration, bringing over their spouses, children and brides from Sylhet (Alexander, 2013; Gardner, 2006). Family-reunification migration took place on a mass scale during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, declining but still important thereafter (Ahmed, 2005, p. 102). As a result, the Bangladeshi community grew faster than any other major immigrant group in Britain until the mid-2000s when Eastern European migration, notably of Poles, took over.

Like many migrations, but more so than most, Bangladeshi migration to Britain was characterized by geographical concentration at both origin and destination. According to Gardner (1995, p. 3), over 95% of the Bangladeshis in Britain...
could trace their origins to Sylhet, a share that dropped to 85% according to Alexander (2013, p. 343) and that which is likely to have declined further as Bangladeshis from other parts of the country arrived more recently. In Britain, the majority of the Bangladeshis have settled in London, especially East London around the dockyard districts of Tower Hamlets and Spitalfields. This spatial concentration has ameliorated over time. Bangladeshi residential settlement has expanded to other British cities and, within London, to other parts of the capital. Conversely, established Bangladeshi communities in Northern and Midland cities, notably Manchester and Birmingham, have spawned southward migration to London, following factory closures in the 1970s and 1980s and the growth of right-wing movements such as the National Front. London offered greater religious and cultural support to these internal migrants. These spatial changes have taken place in the context of a continuous rapid growth of the Bangladeshi-origin population as a whole in Britain. At the 2011 Census, the number of people self-identifying as of Bangladeshi ethnicity was 447,200, half of whom were in London.

**GENDER AND PATRIARCHY IN BANGLADESHI SOCIETY ‘HERE’ AND ‘THERE’**

Having in mind this historical and geographical background, we move to the central theme of the article. How do visits connect but also confront the two poles of the British-Bangladeshi transnational community? How do gender relations shape the demographic make-up, nature and performativity of the visits?

Like the general picture of South Asian families during the era of postwar mass emigration (see the review of Ballard, 1982), there is abundant evidence confirming Bangladeshi society as patriarchal, gerontocratic and marked by rather rigid gender-defined divisions in roles, responsibilities and bodily occupied spaces. As part of purdah (seclusion by the veil; Werbner, 2007), women are supposed to be shielded from strangers. Writing of rural Sylhet a generation ago, Gardner (1995, pp. 27–29) described gender divisions in a typical village in the following terms:

> [There is] a sexual division of labour… Work is divided into male and female spheres… In general all ‘outside’ work is done by men. This includes all agricultural production… and buying and selling goods in the bazaar… Within their homesteads, women work extremely hard. They perform all domestic tasks… cooking, cleaning, childcare… they are also involved in processing agricultural produce […] Bangladeshi society [is] patrilineal. Descent is through men and ancestry traced back through the male line. Residence is usually patrilocal… Thus, when a woman marries, she is transferred from the household of her parents to that of her in-laws. Her labour and loyalty now belong with her husband’s family… This is a world where most of the cards… are held by men.

This may in one sense be a ‘historic’ account, but it refers to a time that actually post-dates much of the Bangladeshi migration to Britain, and therefore to a set of traditional gendered values and practices that were (and arguably remain) in the minds of the British-Bangladeshi migrant community. Moreover, more-recent literature on rural Bangladesh reveals that not much has changed since Gardner’s account. For instance, according to Barikdar et al. (2016), long-standing legal and customary gender rules—including inheritance and ownership laws that heavily disadvantage women—persist and are still accepted. These authors also comment on the value attributed to older people in society. Older men enjoy special respect and are often asked for advice and guidance during the planning and performance of important family events such as weddings, as well as being asked to resolve family disputes and community problems (2016, p. 31).

To a certain extent, these gendered and generational divisions were reproduced in the Bangladeshi migrant community in Britain, especially in the East End of London, the densest concentration of Bangladeshis in the United Kingdom, with a flourishing supply of ‘ethnic’ services including shops, eating places, travel agents and mosques. Other writers who have researched the Bangladeshi community in London before us confirm that many of the gendered ‘ways of life’ in Bangladesh were reproduced in the diaspora (Carey & Shukur, 1985; Gardner, 2002). Hence, whilst most
first-generation men work (or worked since many are now retired) long hours in low-paid employment in industrial and service-sector jobs, only a very small number of older women are economically active outside the household. Instead, they are fully involved in housework, cooking and looking after children and grandchildren as well as caring for their older and illness-affected husbands.4

British-born young women of Bangladeshi heritage do not follow the traditional gendered division of labour and household roles. They are more likely to be highly educated and to have different employment aspirations and pathways than their first-generation counterparts (Scandone, 2018). Typically, they work in different sectors of the economy, from retail to teaching and other highly skilled professions.

Gardner (2006) points out an interesting paradox in how Bangladeshi migration to Britain is framed in terms of gender relations and dependencies, nuancing gender-power relations in the diaspora. The common view of this migration is that it was male-led in its early stages, after which the men/husbands ‘sent for’ their wives and brides, who therefore became economically and socially dependent on their pioneer-migrant menfolk. On the other hand, women’s ‘wife-work’, caring for their children and elderly parents-in-law and, increasingly, for their ageing and frail husbands, creates a different interpretation: ‘in this sense, it is not the wives who are dependents, but men, who rely on their wives for the work they have done in holding households and bodies together’ (2006, p. 376).

That said, detailed research by Ahmed and Phillipson in the early 2000s on the everyday lives of Bangladeshi women in London’s East End leaves no doubt of their oppressed status in families and households run along patriarchal and male-gerontocratic lines (Ahmed, 2005; Phillipson & Ahmed, 2006; Phillipson et al. 2003). Many women felt they were worse off in London because they were isolated in cramped flats at home with their children whilst their husbands were occupied in jobs with long and unsocial working hours. They missed the wider spaces, communal yards and female companionship of their villages of origin.

METHODS

Field research for this paper was a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995) of bidirectional visiting mobilities of migrants and their non-migrant relatives situated in the British-Bangladeshi transnational social space. The approach was to observe, interview, stay with and follow the research participants in order to understand their transnational visiting practices and aspirations, including ‘the interactions between physically proximate, present and visible settings and their remote, absent or invisible counterparts’ (Boccagni & Schrooten, 2018, p. 2211).

Data collection for this paper was carried out by the first author, who is a long-term resident of East London, although born and brought up in Bangladesh. Two main research methods were followed: semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Interviews were conducted with 60 research participants, 33 migrants and 27 non-migrants, all with experience of visiting or being visited (or both). The London-based migrant participants were distributed into two main age-related groups: half were aged 50+ and first-generation migrants and the remainder, including second-generation family members, were younger adults aged at least 25 years. Migrant interviewees represent a variety of professional backgrounds, including teachers, council workers, retail and restaurant workers, manual workers and business owners. The main fieldwork period was 2016–2017, with some interviews carried out in more recent years. Several participants were interviewed more than once, and some of these dual interviews were in different locations: London and Sylhet, in the latter case whilst the participants were visiting. Some non-migrants were interviewed in London whilst visiting their relatives; others were interviewed in Sylhet.

Especially in London, interviews had to be carefully set up beforehand by one or more preliminary contacts and meetings to build trust. Most interviews lasted around 45 min, but several were much longer, extending into social and family occasions with food and other refreshments. All interviewees were asked to consent to being interviewed and recorded. Most of the interviews were in Bengali, but some with second-generation British Bangladeshis were in English. The interview scripts, translated where necessary into English, were transcribed by the first author and
then analysed and interpreted by both authors, exercising a nuanced and reflexive approach. All informants are given pseudonyms, and any details that might compromise their anonymity are removed.

Although the interview sample is fairly balanced between people of migrant origin and non-migrants, other aspects of the sample are not so symmetrical. Three-quarters of the interviewees are men. Because of ease of access, the researcher’s positionality as a young Bangladeshi man living in London, and the patriarchal nature of British-Bangladeshi society, more men than women were available for interview, and most women interviewed had to be ‘accessed’ via their menfolk. The researcher’s positionality as a member of the community under study also resulted in copious offers of food and hospitality, in both London and Sylhet. Whilst this extended and enriched participant observation data, participants’ generosity and warmth were not without subtle power relations and awkwardness, which were reflected upon as part of the research process. Other participant observation encounters with migrants and family members included attending community events in London and spending time in tea shops in Sylhet, both mainly male spaces, especially the latter. The tea shop is the place for *adda*, the habit of Bangladeshi men to gather and chat, ranging from small talk to political debate. Participant observation also took place ‘on the move’ at airports and during participants’ visits to London and Sylhet. Some of the participant observation involved conversations with community leaders, travel agents, taxi drivers, and so forth, who had a general overview of the trends of visiting.

**GENDER AND GENERATION IN BANGLADESHIS’ VISITING EXPERIENCES**

The quote from Maya that opened our paper revealed how (British-)Bangladeshi family-based society is still structured along gendered and generational lines; these alignments and cleavages became sharply exposed during a wedding in the London diaspora. The key points from this quote were the customary obligation to have the groom’s father there to act as the respected *murobbi* for the occasion, and the denial of his family rights by the inhumane incoming travel policy of the UK government. Hence, the father and head of the groom’s male-lineage family was understandably ‘heartbroken’ at not being able to visit for the important life event of the marriage of his son, which he had been hugely looking forward to. Recall also that Maya’s mother, on the other hand, had been disinclined to make the trip.

In this example, the high-profile event of a Bangladeshi wedding in London unveils many of the gendered and generational power relations that characterize Bangladeshi society and its transnational ramifications. In other examples of non-migrants visiting their London-based relatives, these gendered divisions were less evident, but they were nevertheless there, in the unspoken background. Below is the account of Kishore, a businessman interviewed in Sylhet, reflecting back on a visit made 15 years earlier, when he was able to link up with his emigrant relatives and friends in Britain.

My two sisters live in London, and I went to see them... London is a special place. It means a lot to me; it’s where I can meet my siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins and numerous childhood friends... There were some friends I had not seen for 15 years or so... They all wanted to host me... When I went in 2002, it was *Boishakli Mela* [Bangladeshi New Year celebration] in London. My cousin was with me. I spent all day at the *Mela* because I kept seeing so many old friends, some of them were old school friends. It seemed to me that I went back to my childhood for a day...

What is not explicitly said by Kishore is that his cousin and all of his ‘old friends’ whom he met up with were male, so this represents a very gendered form of social reunion.

In other interviews with non-migrants visiting London, we were able to see different gender and generation roles emerging—for instance, when grandchildren are born. Illustrating Baldassar and Merla’s (2013) principle of ‘circulating care’, the idea is that the mother or the mother-in-law of the migrant couple can help to look after the newborn and also assist by taking care of cooking and household chores. This gendered and generational role—that of the visiting grandmother (elsewhere in the literature sometimes called ‘flying grannies’)—puts the spotlight on the mobile older
woman whose husband would visit too (if he were still alive and able to travel) and sometimes ‘be around’ but also need catering for in terms of his food needs and other whims.5

**Men’s experiences**

Let us focus now on the main subgroup in our interview sample: older first-generation men. Several participants in this gender–generation cohort described their experiences of visiting Sylhet in terms that reflected a reclaiming of their masculine identity in the homeland. They were able to do this, according to their narratives, and confirmed by participant observation with visitor-migrants in the field in Sylhet, by engaging in lots of relaxed social activities with their non-migrant peers, thereby regaining the level of social respect, which they felt they had partially sacrificed by going to London. We say ‘partially’ because the experience of being a successful migrant, especially in material terms and bringing up a ‘successful’ family there, was intrinsic to achieving enhanced respect back in Sylhet.

Some of the visitor-interviewees in Sylhet were staying longer-term, often justified as their desire to escape the British winter, and a few were contemplating retiring to Sylhet, leaving their wives and families in the United Kingdom. Here is an extract from field notes following participant observation with Kabir, one of our most willing interviewees, who was interviewed both in London and Sylhet. On this occasion, Kabir was on an extended visit to Sylhet.

Kabir came to Bangladesh alone. He does all his household shopping, with the help of his male servant. However, his meals are prepared for him by a female maid and his brother’s and cousins’ wives; they cook for him in turn. Although his food is prepared for him by female members of his extended family, they are hardly visible in his daily life; they communicate with Kabir via their children who come and ask him—‘what would you like for your next breakfast, lunch or dinner?’ (Field notes, Sylhet)

In other interactions with Kabir, we learnt of his intentions to stay long-term in Sylhet where, he said, ‘there are so many people I know and can spend time together with.’ He contrasted this with life in retirement in London where, as a result of long hours of work and time dedicated to raising a family, ‘I don’t know that many people, I don’t have many friends to talk to and spend time with’. Unsurprisingly, Kabir’s wife and children are not happy with his plan to spend most of his retirement in Bangladesh. A similar narrative was related by Siddik, also interviewed in Sylhet.

I stay a few months here and a few months there. In my heart, I want to come back here permanently. This time, I have already been here 2 months and my wife, children and grandchildren are calling me and begging me to go back to London. It is not easy…. It’s hard to be here by myself. I need to bring tons of medicines with me… Food is also a problem. My brother’s family cooks for me [meaning the female members]… but I want to be here. I feel at ease here, this is the land where I was born and spent my memorable childhood. How can I not be here?

There are multi-layered tensions underlying Siddik’s account. The most obvious one, replicated in Kabir’s story and those of several other older migrant men encountered in Sylhet, is the conflict between the ego-centred plans of the men and their family’s wish for them to stay in London, also for health reasons. Indeed the most commonly stressed downside of spending longer sojourns in Sylhet is the poor quality of the local health service. But there is also apparent in Siddik’s extract a powerful internal conflict. On the one side is his almost existential need to stay in Bangladesh (‘I feel at ease here’; ‘How can I not be here?’) in order to recapture his happy childhood memories (cf. Miah & King, 2018); on the other hand are his worries over food and health, and perhaps some guilt over the sense of abandonment felt by his family in London.

The cases of Siddik and Kabir reveal much about the patrilineal nature of Bangladeshi society and how spaces around the home are clearly demarcated in gendered terms as Gardner (1995), already quoted from earlier, pointed
out in her detailed study of a Sylheti village. Likewise, Janeja (2010), in her ethnography of Bengali food, described the sacredness of the kitchen as a gendered female space where older women and their younger female helpers are in charge. These manifestations of gendered household spaces are also linked to cultural practices associated with food and beverage consumption both at home and in public settings, above all the male devotion to *adda*:

An ethnography of food in Bengal is incomplete without a depiction of the clusters of relations that tea, as an element of the normal foodscape, and its frequent companion, *adda*... create and encapsulate... Predominantly middle-class Bengalis... assemble their everyday and hospitality relations through the polemical practice of *adda*... their sensuous engagement with their relational worlds (Janeja, 2010, pp. 103-104).

*Adda* is arguably the main way that British-Bangladeshi male visitors enjoy and maintain an affective relation with their friends during visits. In Britain, first-generation men miss this ‘polemical practice’ of extended conversations in the tea shops. During the fieldwork in Sylhet, such gatherings were a wonderful opportunity to listen to opinions and experiences of visiting. The key point, however, and to repeat, is that *adda* is an overwhelmingly male-dominated occurrence, like other spatial practices engaged in by visiting men, where the freedom to go out and about whenever they wanted was a privilege not available to visiting women—with some exceptions, as we will see.

Before we come to examine the voices and experiences of women, we briefly note the importance of visits for maintaining the links to the homeland for later generations. Throughout our interviews, there was a common narrative thread about connecting to ‘roots’. In the words of Ranak, interviewed in London:

If you don’t go there regularly, you lose the depth and breadth of your relationship with your relatives... so you need to go there often. On top of that, with the new generations... it’s our duty to take them there, so they will have some sort of connection with their roots... an opportunity to know their relatives, our society, our ancestry, our rituals, how we treat each other, how we treat our elders. They need to see that, understand that.

**Women’s experiences**

Listening to the narratives of female interviewees, we get a more nuanced picture of gendered positionalities and behaviours when visiting Bangladesh. Whilst some accounts, especially those of older women, confirm that return visits to the homeland are a ‘male thing’, other voices from younger women, including the second generation, reveal a negotiation process going on which partly reflects their ascribed positionality as ‘outsiders’ in Sylhet (since they are visiting from ‘abroad’) and partly the changing nature of Bangladeshi society—a change that is to a certain extent due to the impact of migration as well as other global forces. The following extended account from Jahura, a young second-generation British-Bangladeshi professional woman, does an excellent job of summarizing the tensions and negotiations she, and others like her, face when visiting the parental homeland.

There is a very different expectation...women are not expected to go out by themselves... If you are from a...sort of lower-middle-class family, the social restrictions are much more constraining for women. If you are not married, or even if you are, you have to have escorts... people need to know where you are going. So, it’s much more controlled movement outside the home, I would say... People [women] end up covering up and behaving in a much more conservative way. And to be honest, because I am visiting for such a short time, I am quite happy to go along with it. But I still maintain my own [agenda]... I visit my friends in their own houses... I don’t feel obliged to the kind of standard that the Bangladeshis [i.e., local] women conform to because I am, at the end of the day, a foreigner...
Obviously, I am not going to insult or offend anyone. As long as I am discreet and don’t go around parading myself in a way that reflects badly on my family, I feel I can do pretty much as I like. Because my family [here] know me, and they understand that I have lived and worked abroad… I am my own person, I don’t have a husband or a father whom I need to answer to or that my brothers don’t accept that kind of behaviour.

Maya, whose interview extract opened the paper, expressed a similar view, coming this time from a first-generation woman, yet one who arrived in Britain at quite a young age and had spent the latter part of her formative years there:

…it’s not inconvenient, I won’t say it like that. I am fine, I can do most things… So, I would not go somewhere I don’t know at all; they might con me or take me to dangerous places. Those things I am a bit concerned about because law and order are not totally in place… It used to be very patriarchal, but the country is changing… So I go on my own… I am not suggesting to be disrespectful; be respectful but solid women so that nobody can tease you. Just go where you want, stay safe and be assertive… I am not going out of the boundary, not being obscene or anything like that… When I visit Bangladesh, I restrict myself by not showing too much of the feminist side of me out of respect, not out of threat. Because every country has its cultural boundaries, and I stay within.

In contrast to the agentic attitude and travel experiences of Jasura and Maya, who are doing their bit to challenge the gendered geographies of power in their ‘homeland’, older Bangladeshi women are more reluctant to visit, largely because their lives are very much focused on their children and grandchildren in Britain. This is reflected in Salma’s narrative extract below. Salma is a first-generation widow in her 70s, who lives in a small council flat; her adult children and grandchildren live relatively close by and keep an eye on her on a daily basis, dropping in to check on her.6 Her account also reveals that her now-deceased husband retired to live in Bangladesh many years earlier:

I have rarely visited Bangladesh. I last visited a long time ago, 27 or 28 years ago. That was when my husband died there. He had decided to retire and live there. He spent the final years of his life there. Also, my parents died there a long time ago. But we have properties and a house there… I have relatives there from my parents’ side of the family as well as from my husband’s side of the family… cousins, nephews, nieces. I do speak to them by phone occasionally. They ask me to go and visit them. But I don’t want to go on my own leaving my children here. I have all my children and grandchildren here in this country. Where do you want me to go? I have to be where my grandchildren are; this is how it should be… Why would I go to Bangladesh then?

What happens to gendered and generational experiences when husband and wife visit together? From the evidence we collected on this, visits are relatively harmonious, and some female respondents were positive about their experiences, even if this positivity also reflected the continuation of gendered patterns of behaviour. Here is a typical account from Nahar, aged in her early 30s when interviewed. Towards the end of the quote below, Nahar refers to some of the interhousehold tensions that were encountered as a result of the amount of time the couple spent with her rather than his parents.

I visited in 2017. We did not have children then. Me and my husband went for 3 weeks in January… I felt a little bit [the need] because all my family is there… I think my husband is quite understanding and progressive in that he realized my emotional state and decided to have a trip to Bangladesh. I was over the moon! After he [husband] bought the plane tickets, I was counting every minute till we actually boarded the place. The night before the flight, I could not sleep at all; it was very emotional for me. I bought small gifts for my family and friends like perfumes and cosmetics and so on. When we landed in...
Bangladesh, it felt so good. I cannot explain it in words. My mum cried when she saw me: We hugged for such a long time.

It was a bit tricky though. I negotiated with my husband in London that we go first to our [my family’s] home. I said to him, ‘look, this is my first time; for you, it’s usual to come and go [make visits], but I cannot wait to spend time with my mum and younger siblings…. However, it did not go very well with his [husband’s] family. In Bangladesh—you know how it works—the husband’s family is more important; you need to follow your husband and his family needs to be listened to and respected. It hurts my husband and his family’s image if he prioritizes and spends more time in my parental home than his. My husband had to face a lot of criticism: They were telling him things like, what kind of man stays more days at his father-in-law’s house than his [own father’s]?"

In terms of the conceptual framework of gendered and generational geographies of power, there are several insights provided by this quote. At first sight, Nahar expresses her agency in persuading her busy husband to take time off to accompany her to visit her parents and friends in Bangladesh. But it also transpires that whilst this was her first visit, her husband had been several times on his own. Her expressions of gratefulness to her husband, whom she describes as ‘quite understanding and progressive’, only serve to underscore her subordinate position. However, when the ‘social location’ shifts to Bangladesh, the geographies and relations of power change and traditional principles of patrilineality reassert themselves. As a result, the husband is made to feel emasculated by his own family when the couple spends more time visiting Nahar’s parents than his.

**DISCUSSION**

Let us set out some generalizations. These are based on a combination of insights distilled from interview narratives, participant observation and casual conversations with individuals connected to the phenomenon of visiting in one way or another, such as travel agents and taxi drivers.

On the whole, homeland visits are enjoyed by all categories of participants—first and second generations, men, women and children—except, obviously, when such visits are linked to tragedy such as illness or death in the family. In terms of gender, age and generation categories, we note some clear, common patterns. Men are able to enjoy freedom and leisure on their visits to their home villages and towns. They are able to display (through gifts, generosity and their local purchase of property) their material success as migrants, and they spend much time meeting old friends in the public spaces of local tea shops and community premises, engaging in *adda*. Some older migrants make longer visits on their own and even talk of returning to live in Sylhet for good.

Women are less open to make return visits, especially when they are middle-aged or older, as they are reluctant to leave behind their adult children and young grandchildren for the duration of their stay in Bangladesh. Hence, they see their ‘social location’ as firmly linked to wherever their children and grandchildren are. When they do make visits to their rural Sylhet homelands, they tend to be confined to their extended family’s household compound (the *bari*), where their gendered socialization focuses around spending time with female kin, preparing food and assisting with household tasks. Whilst some female participants found this restricting, other interviewees enjoyed the change from a more intense and lonely regime of household drudgery in often cramped accommodation in London and were grateful for relaxing days with other female relatives and neighbours in Sylhet.

The experiences of the *younger generation* depend very much on the age at which they made the visits. Adult children, the mature second generation, make independent visits if they are men (or, if married, often with their wives and third-generation children) and generally enjoy connecting with their relatives and similar-age cousins. Likely to have better jobs and higher incomes than their first-generation immigrant parents, they appreciate their relative financial...
privilege, the freedom to roam around and the hospitality of their extended family in Sylhet. Adult second-generation women are much less likely to travel to Bangladesh independently, except to visit ageing or sick relatives, and are more constrained in their movements around the country and the local area. Younger children visit Sylhet en famille, generally during the school holidays. As Gardner and Mand (2012) and Zeitlyn (2012, 2015) show, their reactions are very varied depending on age, gender and family circumstances. Young boys are granted a lot of freedom and tend to be indulged and spoilt, whereas young girls are kept close to the bari and, beyond the age of around 12, are closely chaperoned whilst visiting.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the experience of visits between London and Sylhet, the two main locations across the British-Bangladeshi transnational social field, as expressions of gendered and generational relations. The performativity of visits, by their very nature, concentrated in space and time, and their frequent association with highly significant life events such as weddings and funerals, bring into sharp focus the gendered geographies of power that operate across diverse social locations. Transnational visits are the main face-to-face occasions that lubricate the British-Bangladeshi social field; indeed, they are an intrinsic part of ‘migranthood’ (King & Lulle, 2015; Zeitlyn, 2012), although in recent decades, such visits are increasingly accompanied by all manner of virtual communication media.

Part of the essential nature of visits is that they expose the ‘double absence’ of the ‘suffering’ migrant who is simultaneously an immigrant and an emigrant (parsing the classic nomenclature of Sayad, 2004). His or her perpetual absence from either ‘home/desh or ‘away/bidesh is central to our argument and the participants’ discourse. The homecoming visit does not resolve this dilemma but emphasizes it (the visitors are always Londoni, ‘Londoners’); yet, whilst in London, their absence from their homeland is constantly and keenly felt. Not all homeland visits are free of tension—as in the case of Nahar and her husband.

Especially amongst first-generation and older (British-)Bangladeshis, visits are much more widely experienced by men, either on their own or travelling with other family members. Older women, both in London and Sylhet, are rare solo travellers and, as the case of Maya’s mother revealed, also often reluctant to travel en famille, preferring to stay where their children and grandchildren are—unless, of course, their descendants are ‘there’ rather than ‘here’. Grandmother Salma, from her cosy flat in London, with children and grandchildren close by, was adamant that it made no sense for her to visit her more distant relatives in Sylhet. By contrast, older men, such as Kabir and Siddik, are more ready to leave their children and grandchildren (and wives) behind in order to make solo visits to Bangladesh where they revel in spending time in their home villages, meeting friends, engaging in adda and regaining the respect, status and friendships, which they felt they had lost in London. Both Kabir and Siddik, like other older male visitors who were interviewed, also stressed their need to be often in Sylhet to check on their properties and businesses, including attending to conflicts over land and inheritances with other family members (Miah, 2021). These visit functions were mostly denied to women who were less concerned by such issues and disadvantaged by inheritance laws as well as by gendered customary practices from building up property and business interests in Bangladesh.

For the younger members of the British-Bangladeshi transnational community, visits were less dominated by family relations (although these aspects remained important for most of our younger participants) and were more about combining ‘family-duty’ visits with travel to other parts of Bangladesh, such as the holiday resort of Cox’s Bazar. These combined itineraries were especially important for families, and here, away from the disciplining gaze of village-based kin, gendered rules could be relaxed somewhat. Even so, the freedom of younger men, married or single, to roam around on their own and in male groups was not accorded to the same extent to women. Nevertheless, as some of our evidence showed, younger women, both of the first and second generation, are exerting some pressure for change in the choreography of visits. By playing on their role as ‘foreigners’ and ‘outsiders’ (but still retaining an identity as female members of British-Bangladeshi families), they are able to extend their personal geographies of movement in the homeland, whilst carefully staying within the boundaries of family decency and reputation.
Finally, generational change is afoot. For the first generation, visits to Sylhet are about nostalgia and a link to the ‘memoryscapes’ of the past (Miah & King, 2018), as well as to a possible future (for the men at least) of retirement there and a recouping of male sociality and community respect. The second generation, who have generally been taken on childhood visits to Sylhet by their parents, retains an affective relationship with their parental homeland and homeland kin but is less interested in owning or inheriting property or businesses there; they see their economic future, where they will develop their lives and careers, in Britain. By the third generation, links to Sylhet are weakened and limited more to curiosity about ancestral roots. If they take place at all, visits become occasional rather than regular and the long-term future of the British-Bangladeshi transnational community, as a functioning social space linked by frequent visits back and forth, remains in doubt, at least in terms of its predominant geographical articulation between East London and Sylhet.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest that could be perceived as prejudicing the impartiality of the research reported.

**DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**
Due to the confidential nature of the data collected, interview transcripts are not available to be shared.

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**ENDNOTES**
1. Despite its theoretical attractiveness, the gendered geographies of power model have not been widely used in empirical research on gendered migrations. For two existing studies, see Vullnetari and King (2011), who employ the framework to examine the impact of remittances on gender relations in Albania, and Sondhi and King (2017), on how Indian students’ study abroad impacts their gendered positions within family and professional networks.

2. Although Zeitlyn (2013) maintains that with the passage of time (i.e., since the paper on *desh bidesh* by Gardner, 1993), the distinction the two transnational poles has become less important as a result of the emergence of a kind of unified British-Bangladeshi transnational social field and because many British-born members of the ethnic community increasingly regard Britain as their *desh* / homeland.

3. The gradual dilution of Sylheti dominance over the spatial origins of the Bangladeshi-heritage population in Britain is also affected by the recent onward migration of ‘European’ Bangladeshis to the United Kingdom especially from Italy (the second-largest host country in Europe for Bangladeshis), Portugal and Spain. These Bangladeshis are mostly from the more central and urbanized districts in Bangladesh. Their onward migration is largely driven by two factors: the post-2018 financial crisis, which made their lives in Southern Europe more economically precarious, and their desire to secure better educational and career chances for their second-generation children. Legally, their onward migration was facilitated by having obtained Italian, Portuguese or Spanish citizenship, which allowed them free mobility rights to the (pre-Brexit) United Kingdom as ‘European’ citizens. See Della Puppa and King (2019), Mapril (2021) and Morad and Sacchetto (2021).

4. Bangladeshis, especially first-generation older men, have high rates of long-term illness as a result of harsh working lives, crowded and often damp housing, poor diet and lack of exercise (Miah & King, 2022). Census data for 2011 quoted by Victor and Zubair (2016) show that older Bangladeshis report higher levels of chronic illness than any other major ethnic group.

5. See the extensive Albanian evidence on the sometimes-extended visits of Albanian grandparents to their children’s families for caring purposes (King & Vullnetari, 2006; King et al., 2014). On the more generic phenomenon of ‘flying grandmothers’ or ‘transnational grannies’, see Plaza (2000).

6. Although this was not raised in the interview, we have the feeling that the reason why Salma had not moved in with one of her sons was because she did not want to be a burden to them, and neither did she or her family wants to give up the tenure of the council flat, with its central position regarding shops and health services and its nice outdoor balcony where Salma could stroll up and down, take the air and watch the world go by.

**REFERENCES**


IT’S JUST A NATURAL HUMAN THING TO DO


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