



Photo: J. Boethling

Values in transition

The debate about the effects of migration is still centred on economic aspects. However, the return of migrants also changes the society and cultures of their country of origin. These changes are particularly pronounced where women have emigrated and return to their communities after several years' absence.

Until recently, discussion of migration has consistently focused on the negative impacts of emigration, especially when the individuals concerned are highly qualified. However, a degree of euphoria now prevails about the positive effects (Faist, 2008). International organisations, the governments of migrants' countries of origin and host countries' development policy bodies all emphasise the positive influence which migrants and diaspora communities exercise on development processes in their countries of origin,

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in particular through the transfer of money back home (see also the article on pages 12–15). The organisations argue that such transfers have positive effects, combating poverty and leading to income redistribution, as their effects are felt where they are needed: primarily in rural areas in the migrants' countries of origin and directly by the migrants' families (Kapur, 2004). In such debates, development is usually defined as economic development; the cultural and social changes instigated by migration in the migrants' countries of origin are rarely analysed. This is astonishing, given that the new models of migration – especially temporary labour migration, which has proven to be the predominant model in Asia in the course of global restructuring – mean that migrants frequently

do return to their countries of origin. The issue of integration is therefore not relevant within the host country, since political or social integration in most host countries is neither planned nor (due to the legal position) possible, but to the country of origin upon the migrant's return. This issue covers a far wider area than any economic transformation or change.

■ Bangladesh: migration increasingly female

In Bangladesh, temporary labour migration to the Middle East or South-East Asia to work in construction, factories or plantations come mainly from rural areas. Increasing numbers of Bangladeshi women are migrating,

especially to South-East Asia, to seek employment in export-oriented factories. Although the number of female emigrants remains far smaller than the number of male emigrants due to rigid exit requirements, a ‘feminisation’ of migration is occurring – even in Bangladesh, with its Islamic influence (for a detailed discussion on the term ‘feminisation of migration’ see for example Piper, 2005). The increased migratory movement is caused by the rise in demand, both globally and regionally, for female labour. It is also caused by the transformation of rural areas: the increasing mechanisation of agriculture, the switch to genetically modified seed and the sharper focus on aquaculture all have a negative impact on the natural resource base and living conditions for small and medium-scale farmers. The impacts of climate change exert further pressure. Moreover, in many rural areas, temporary international labour migration has become an important form of social security, bolstered by the positive tales told by returnees and the activities of recruitment agents. The fact that recruitment costs for female migrants are far lower than those for males, due to lower wages in the host countries, also contributes to the continual increase in numbers of female migrants – and therefore also of female returnees – despite the negative image which female migration has in Bangladeshi society.

■ Resistance to a change in values

Empirical research in Bangladesh shows that reintegration is especially difficult for female migrants. They encapsulate the changes in society and local cultures which have now been occurring for many years in rural areas. The increasing migration of women is not the only factor contributing to changes in the local interpretations of Islamic gender relations; the programmes and projects implemented

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since the 1980s by international and national NGOs also contribute. In reaction to these, men in public life, especially in rural areas, are actively opposing those organisations and individuals that seek to allow women access to resources. They criticise programmes and projects for women, and sometimes assault the female organisers. Recently-bolstered Islamic movements are especially active in this, employing village committees to denounce the ‘transgressions’ of women involved in these projects or in migration processes. Criticism is levelled in particular at women entering into areas traditionally viewed as a male preserve – such as economic activity and migration. These organisations view female migration – at least without male ‘protection’ – as a threat to the existing gender relations; this is also how they view material possessions gained via small loans made to women. These Islamic organisations find support from male migrants and their representatives, who view female migration as a challenge to their power and their constructed role as the main breadwinners.

■ Double standards

The status of men and their families rises through migration and return, regardless of the financial benefit. The symbols of this success, such as a corrugated iron roof or an electronic device, are presented in public and bring further social inequality and differentiation in particularly those rural regions that have formed centres for temporary labour migration due to their social networks. In contrast, migration of female family members is not subject to nearly as much discussion, and the same status symbols are either not present or not presented in the same way. In contrast, female



migrants who return are often stigmatised and shunned. Thus migration means a loss of status for women, and for their families. Women who migrate and return are well aware of this process of stigmatisation and the transformations which they have initiated. They are met with images brought home by male migrants via their networks – networks often characterised by the exclusion of female migrants, particularly in the host country. These images include tales of the ‘Western’ lifestyle which female migrants adopt abroad. As a result, female migrants are excluded on their return, or they or their families find it hard to organise a marriage.

■ A different perspective

Female migrants are not merely ‘victims’, but instead make an active contribution to the negotiations and debates described. The process of migration and the experiences they gain in their host countries alter these women’s perception of gender rela-



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tions and of the gender-specific division of labour. Many female returnees interviewed in the context of this study argued that in Malaysia – one of the major host countries for female Bangladeshi migrants – a woman taking up paid employment outside the home was considered fully compatible with Islam and brought no ‘shame’ to her family. They questioned why women’s paid employment outside the home is viewed in Bangladesh as a violation of the locally constructed Islamic gender order. These women are also fully aware that in Bangladesh Malaysia is

perceived as a role model in terms of successfully combining Islamisation with economic development. Although the visions of female migrants have yet to be translated into institutional participation in negotiations on local Islamic practices and identities, due to a lack of networks among such women and of support from other organisations, the mobility of women can bring change in and of itself, as can the fact that these women question and sidestep local and cultural practices. Thus female migrants who have returned have begun regionally to distribute information and loans to women who wish to migrate, and the first locally embedded networks of women are emerging. Often, female returnees do not give away all of their income but instead seek ways and means of purchasing land in their own name. This brings changes: although it does not call into question current formal and informal practice on land ownership, it does initiate debate about female ownership of land. When female returnees wear clothing brought home with them, at least around the house, this sparks discussion about appropriate female behaviour and means that increasing numbers of women become interested in a life outside their narrow local confines.

■ From local to national

Although the transformations described above occur primarily at local

level, at national level they are increasingly sparking debate on gender relations and the constructions of masculinity and femininity. The increasing feminisation of migration is reported and discussed in both the media and politics. A variety of stakeholders are using this theme to advance their positions in society and politics; the ongoing process of Islamisation is one issue which brings this phenomenon into sharp relief. Thus migration and return bring both economic transformation and changes to society. The efforts of female returnees to emigrate again are doubtlessly a response to the difficulties they face upon reintegration. These efforts also show that the causes of migration processes and their effects are not purely economic in nature. To those enacting the processes – in this case female migrants – development means migration and it does not primarily or exclusively mean economic development in their countries of origin but ‘self’ development.

This article is based on the analysis of qualitative surveys conducted in Bangladesh and Malaysia among male and female migrants, female returnees and their families.

A full list of references can be obtained from the author or at www.rural.21.com. See also: Petra Dannecker 2008: Migrants’ Visions of Development: A Gendered Approach, in: Population, Space and Place, 15 (2), pp. 119–132.

Zusammenfassung

Migration führt nicht nur zu ökonomischen Veränderungen, sondern auch zu gesellschaftlichem Wandel. Besonders ausgeprägt ist dieser, wenn es um die Migration und Rückkehr von Frauen geht. Der Beitrag beschreibt die kulturellen und gesellschaftlichen Transformationen, die die zunehmende temporäre Arbeitsmigration von Frauen im islamisch geprägten Land Bangladesch und hier vor allem im ländlichen Raum nach sich zieht. Er zeigt die Wechselwirkungen zwischen unterschiedlichen globalen Prozessen auf, etwa der gestiegenen Nachfrage nach weiblichen Arbeitskräften,

der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit und dem Klimawandel, aber auch den Umstrukturierungen im landwirtschaftlichen Bereich; zudem beschreibt er, mit welchen Reaktionen Rückkehrerinnen in Bangladesch konfrontiert sind und welche Diskussionsprozesse sie anstoßen.

Resumen

La migración no sólo conduce a cambios económicos, sino también a una transformación social. Este último aspecto es especialmente marcado cuando se trata de la migración y el retorno de mujeres. El aporte describe las transformaciones

culturales y sociales que trae consigo la creciente migración laboral temporal de mujeres provenientes sobre todo de las áreas rurales de Bangladesh, un país donde domina la religión islámica. El artículo muestra las interacciones entre distintos procesos globales, como la mayor demanda de una fuerza laboral femenina, la cooperación para el desarrollo y el cambio climático, así como los cambios estructurales en el sector agrícola. Además, el autor explica a qué reacciones deben enfrentarse las migrantes a su retorno a Bangladesh, y qué procesos de discusión se generan.