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Working men: Bangladeshi migrants in
the global labour force



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Abstract

In this paper, I illustrate that Bangladeshi male migrants are now part of a vast pool of inexpensive and mobile workers that are maintained as such because of powerful structures of inequality that require the extraction of their labour at both the global and local scale. These low-waged migrants' occupy particular positions in Singapore's segmented labour market – a point which remains the backdrop of my argument. Drawing upon migrants' own narratives, I examine how Bangladeshi men make sense of their labour migration to Singapore, particularly after they fall out of work. **With reference to Bourdieu's notions of class and habitus**, I demonstrate that their responses are not only based upon instrumental calculation but are also powerfully shaped by a complex set of normative gendered formations which can further constrain their voices. I argue here that these masculine normativities cannot only be reduced to patriarchy but further, become a means for the reproduction of class position.

Author

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Contents

Migration, gender and work	8
Bangladeshis in the global economy	11
Incorporating foreign labour.....	12
Migrant selves.....	15
Masculinity and Mobility	15
Masculine tastes.....	19
Conclusion.....	21
References.....	23

The processes and experiences of gender and movements of low-waged, documented migrants are now widely understood. Indeed, it has been persuasively shown that women from developing economies are consistently constructed as particularly attractive to employers for jobs in the textile and electronics industries because of persistent assumptions about them such as obedience, patience and dexterity., and as a result, they are being paid low wages, are denied job security and are provided with limited benefits (Elmhirst, 2007; Espiritu, 2003; Gibson et al, 2001; McDowell, 2008; Mills, 1999; Ong, 1987; Parrenas, 2001; Pratt, 2004; Silvey, 2003; 2006; Tyner, 1996; 2004; Wright, 2006; Yeoh and Huang, 1998; 2000). The impact of migration on gendered identities and experiences has been predominantly analyzed from the perspective of female migrants. While there is a growing body of scholars that has examined the reproduction and experiences of masculinities, research on the experiences of migrant men remains relatively limited (Broughton, 2008; Datta et al, 2009; Jackson, 1991; McDowell, 2003; McDowell et al, 2009). While I continue to draw upon insights from these scholars of both migration and gender, my data shows that there remains considerable potential to contribute to this research field, in particular, by analyzing the reproduction of masculinity through a class lens.

Just as Third World women are being constructed as more suitable for particular types of work, young men from developing countries are also being situated as more capable of certain types of work (Denissen, 2010; Hopkin, 1997; Jackson, 1991; McDowell, 2003; 2007; Ryan et al, 2008). It has been widely noted that men's experience of paid work is directly linked to their conception of masculinity. Furthermore, these gendered normativities about work also designate which jobs are *not* masculine. These normativities, however, are not only imposed by macro-level institutions such as state actors but are also reproduced and lived through the micro-level as well, where men themselves see certain types of work as "not men's work". Indeed, it has been argued that the hegemony of masculinity – albeit an incomplete and unstable one that always requires maintenance – accounts for and is reproduced through the reflexive operation of real people. Ideals of being a successful provider for the family becomes a principle to which people focus their desire and aspirations. As Ahmad and Keeler show through their respective case studies of Pakistani and Kurdish migrants in London, male migrants taking on sewing and catering work are sometimes not regarded as paid employment by other men but as "women's work" (2008). Burrell and Herbert further show how gender plays a role in the downward mobility of occupational status for Polish and East African Asian male migrants who feel unable to live up to masculine ideals of material success and provision for

their families (2008). Masculinity is hence intersected by ethnic, race and, as my focus here, class, where men from different social backgrounds experience various aspects of social life differently. Masculinity – or indeed, masculinities – are marked by hierarchy and exclusion that not only affect women but men as well where the latter do not all benefit equally from, *even as they aspire towards*, the “patriarchal dividend” (Hibbins and Pease, 2009: 2). I would argue, however, that subjectivities of masculinity do not only maintain forms of patriarchy but instead, go further to reproduce class inequalities through the economic practices of migration.

In this paper, I demonstrate that Bangladeshi male migrants are part of a vast pool of inexpensive and mobile workers that are maintained as such because of powerful structures of inequality that require the extraction of their labour at both the global and local scale. These low-waged migrants occupy particular positions in the segmented labour market – a point which remains the backdrop of my argument. Drawing upon migrants’ own narratives, I examine how Bangladeshi men make sense of their labour migration to Singapore, particularly after they fall out of work. I demonstrate that their responses are not only based upon instrumental calculation but are also powerfully shaped by a complex set of normative gendered formations which can further constrain their voices.

This paper is part of my doctoral research where I conducted fieldwork in Singapore for a period of 14 months, from October 2009 until December 2010. The primary data I present here are drawn from participant-observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews and informal conversations I had with migrants, NGO workers and middle-level management at shipyards and construction companies. The Bangladeshi male migrants were between the ages of 20 to 35, with half of them married. Most of them were from Dhaka and have at least a high school certificate. For all of them, Singapore is the first place they have ever worked outside of Bangladesh, while a number of them have relatives working in the Gulf.

Migration, gender and work

As Hugo suggests, migration could create situations and dilemmas that disturb pre-existing notions of gender, class and race (2000). In particular, the linkages between masculinities and migration have not been as often conceptualized (Batnitzky et al, 2009; Charsley, 2005; Gamburd, 2000; Osella and Osella, 2000). It has, however, been

acknowledged that migrant men may be disadvantaged in service sector work in the UK due to issues of skills transfer from their sending countries (Batnitzky et al, 2009; Raghuram, 2004). It has also been observed that analyzing re-negotiations in gender identities in the context of migration can demonstrate that identity is not an essential attribute (Batnitzky et al, 2009; Gibson-Graham, 1996). While I do not trace the transformations of gendered identities and relations per se as male migrants move from Bangladesh to Singapore here, I will illustrate how gender is reproduced through these men's experiences of their positions in the division of labour. This paper contributes to the body of work that addresses the nuanced ways in which contemporary migrants adapt to their new circumstances while preserving aspects of culture and social organizations from their places of origin (Glick Schiller et al, 1995; Vertovec and Cohen, 1999). I would further argue through my case study, that the experience of new circumstances in the receiving area is tempered by pre-existing forms of social reproduction so that certain aspects of their gendered selves are reinforced through the labour migration process.

By integrating migrants' stories with Bourdieu's notions of class, I show that Bangladeshi men occupy a particular location within the segmented labour market in Singapore as low-waged migrants – one that reproduces class and its intersections with gender, ethnicity and nationality. In other words, I seek to show that social reproduction is always intertwined with economic production and people's positions within the latter tend to circuit. Further, as Lawson argues, migrant narratives can “reveal that access to labor markets, state assistance or social networks, are not merely unique individual experiences but rather, are systematically shaped by social relations of gender, class, ethnicity and migrant status” (2000: 174). This can return these subjects of development to the center of theorizations about them (Silvey and Lawson, 1999).

Through Bourdieu's theoretical notions of class, I interpret the social reproduction of these workers as men conditioned through their position in the division of labour, even after they fall out of work. All of the Bangladeshis I interviewed are, or have at some point during their time in Singapore been, rendered jobless and homeless. I realize as I write the almost paradoxical task of organizing data about instability and precariousness. I hope, however, that it becomes clear through the following that there is a systemic process working to entrench these workers within a particular position in the labour hierarchy in Singapore, which ultimately marginalizes them from economic production. The elements of class theories I have selectively utilized, namely Bourdieu's, provide explanatory power that addresses the regeneration of

inequalities through the intersections of economic production *and* social reproduction. Indeed, Bourdieu himself argued for the flexibility of his theories and the necessity of inconsistency (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). It was through my fieldwork that I truly grasped how unstable and fluid empirical realities and the theories that frame them can be. This was where the extended case method became a useful tool not only for making sense of our empirical world through a particular theoretical lens but also for explaining everyday practices when theoretical prescriptions start to falter (Burawoy, 1998). This methodologically self-conscious way of extending, reconstructing and piecing together theories was particularly useful, indeed, even necessary in weaving together the migrants lived realities of economic production and social reproduction.

While Bourdieu discusses at length the cultural dimensions of class at the scale of the individual's bodily practices – most powerfully captured in the concept of habitus – he does not leave the economy out of it. Rather, social formations and differentiations are necessarily conditioned by economic bases – the habitus is inherently a product of the various economic resources differently available to individuals in a given field. The empirical discussion of people's social class position must therefore always be linked to their economic capital. In other words, social reproduction is not only tied to the relations of economic production but is another form of entrenched social domination. If everything suggests a belief that there is a correlation between people's incomes and consumption habits, it is because taste is almost always the product of economic conditions. Attitudes of prudence and thrift amongst the working class are, therefore, regulated by their specific positions in the division of labour, by their own economy of means. This form of regulation and domination is arguably more deeply entrenched as domination no longer needs to be exerted in a direct way when it is “entailed in possession of means ... of appropriating the mechanisms of the field of production and the field of cultural production” (Bourdieu, 1977: 184).

Social reproduction takes on relations of domination that are rendered dynamic between individuals and at the same time, become social formations that are mediated by objective, institutionalized mechanisms to the point of being invisible. As Wacquant states, “class lies in neither structures nor in agency alone but in their relationship as it is historically produced, reproduced and transformed” (2007: 51). Social class, it could be argued, can only arise through the conjunction of these two partially independent forces and it bears repeating that both structure and people's agency are very much shaped by the unequal distribution of economic resources. If Marx was right in saying that economic relations are very much social relations,

then this part of the discussion shows that social relations and more specifically, habituses, are themselves powerfully conditioned and differentiated by economic relations as well. Hence, it is reasonable to argue that objective differences reproduce themselves in the subjective experience of difference (Weininger, 2004).

These structures, however, are also met with the active agency of the workers themselves – indeed, the sense of loss and frustration I felt in the migrants also collided with their own purposes for taking on the precarious, unstable work that seems to ultimately marginalize them to the peripheries of the economy. Undergirding this agency is the ongoing construction of their gender subjectivities, which is always tied with waged labour. It is also this subjectivity, which, when mobilized through their agency, often masks the difficulties and stresses that are encountered by these workers on a daily basis. In other words, the migrants are themselves enabling and participating in this exploitative process, reproducing certain patterns of subordination and appropriation of their own labour (Burawoy, 2000).

Bangladeshis in the global economy

As Peck argues, prior forms of geographically uneven development always recreate or at least shape emergent geographies of work (1996). I assert that the economic stagnation of Bangladesh and the restructuring of Singapore's economy – discursively constructed as a cosmopolitan one – set up a highly calibrated transnational labour market for male migrants from Bangladesh to take on certain jobs in Singapore. At one level, the mobility of Bangladeshi men represents another example of how the current global economy consistently relies on migrants from developing countries as the foundation of a cheap and compliant workforce. As capital gets more and more mobile, its drive to increase productivity while driving down production costs leads firms further and further afield. One result has been to shift labour intensive industries to highly dispersed sites around the globe (Mills, 1999; Kelly, 2002; Dicken, 2003). Another is the incorporation of different migrant bodies into low waged, low status work within global cities. As low-waged labour migrants elsewhere, the Bangladeshi male migrant worker is valued precisely for their cheapness rather than their skill for the employers, and at a larger scale, for Singapore's overall development.

Bangladesh has a current population of about 141 million with a labour force of 60.3 million. 62.3 % of its working population is in agriculture, with most farmers

taking on non-farm work during the off-season to supplement their household incomes¹. Most farmers live on farms of less than 2.5 acres and despite rich soils, ideal growing conditions and an abundant supply of labour, agricultural yields are extremely low in comparison with Malaysia and Sri Lanka. The combination of geopolitical location, ecological conditions and historical circumstances has turned Bangladesh into an exporter of cheap labour (Rahman, 2000). Bangladesh's success in increasing school enrolment has been one of the most notable achievements of the last twenty-five years, although there still remains a significant disparity between rural and urban areas. The unemployment rate, however, remains high (United Nations report on Bangladesh²). Without employment security in Bangladesh, workers seek transnational forms of employment in spite of, or perhaps precisely because of, the tyranny of the global political economy. Work migration has therefore become a means of relieving the domestic market of unemployed or under-employed persons as well as a source of foreign exchange earnings. The amount of remittances sent back to Bangladesh from Singapore supports the pattern of temporary migration: between 2007-2008, Bangladeshis remitted some 130.11million USD. At one level then, participation in the global economy through the export of cheap labour does seem to benefit the Bangladesh economy, perhaps explaining the motivations for individuals to continue taking on this sojourn, in spite of the high agent fees and the hyper-exploitative work conditions.

Incorporating foreign labour

I now turn to the issue of labour within Singaporean space in recent years. The turn of the century saw an increase in the non-citizen population – a direct consequence of the city-state's restructuring policies to attract and rely on foreign labour (Yeoh, 2004). The deliberate and strategic reliance on “foreign manpower” is part and parcel of the dominant neoliberal discourse of globalization as an “inevitable and virtuous growth dynamic” (Coe and Kelly, 2002:348). As elsewhere, the transmigrant population grows in tandem with restructuring processes to render labour more “flexible”

1 High Commission of Bangladesh website, http://bangladesh.org.sg/cms/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=62&Itemid=95, date accessed, March 5th 2010”.

2 United Nations website, <http://www.un-bd.org/bgd/index.html>, date accessed March 28th, 2010.

in relation to capital (Yeoh, 2004). The workforce has been strategically and rigorously configured to incorporate a significantly large foreign labour pool which can be broadly divided into two strands: foreign talent and foreign workers. Both strands of workers are brought into Singaporean space strategically and they are administered very differently, although there is no space for me to elaborate on their differences here (see for example, Yeoh, 2006). The state's management of its migrant populations requires different modalities of government based on various mechanisms of calculation, surveillance, control and regulation that create a graduated system to which different migrants are incorporated (Ong, 2000). I would argue that the instruments for the administration of foreigners into Singapore set in place the mechanisms for extracting particular forms of labour from different bodies, dividing labour that reproduces particular classed and gendered bodies.

The high demand for migrants workers on work permits illustrates not only the low wages but also what is deemed acceptable by these low-status workers, and consequently, what is unacceptable for Singaporean workers. They mostly take on jobs that require manual labour or shift work in sectors such as manufacturing, construction, shipbuilding, personal services as well as domestic work (Straits Times, 9th Dec 2009; Yeoh, 2006). Gender, nationality and ethnicity profiles shape the overall form of work permit holders. The ways these factors affect female migrant domestic workers in Singapore has been well-documented by Brenda Yeoh and Shirlena Huang (see for example, Yeoh, et al, 1998; 1999). Hard physical labour such as construction and shipbuilding is largely performed by foreign males, with Bangladeshis and Chinese nationals among the most visible, though a large number of Thais, Burmese and others also work in these sectors. Seventy percent of the labour force in construction is performed by foreigners, far higher than the national 37.6 percent reliance rate. There are an estimated 120,000 Bangladeshi nationals working in Singapore, an increase of some 20,000 from the year 2000 (Straits Times, 2010; Rahman, 2000). This is likely to be a conservative estimate as the actual numbers are not released to the public and also do not include undocumented Bangladeshis taking on spontaneous work under tourist visas. Of this number, 90% are on work permit and in the construction and marine industries (Bangladesh High Commission website³). Work permits are valid for either one or two years and, depending on the availability of work, are eligible for renewal for up to two years (Rahman, 2000). Migrants on the work permit are also highly dependent on their employers as stipulated by the Employment of Foreign

3 http://bangladesh.org.sg/cms/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=36&Itemid=57

Manpower Act in Singapore. Aside from their wages, workers entering through the work permit system also rely on their employers for housing, daily meals, transportation to and from the work site, medical insurance and also eventual repatriation.

I met all 35 of my respondents through a Singapore NGO called Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) where I had volunteered throughout my doctoral fieldwork between October 2008 and December 2009. Aside from volunteering on a daily basis at the meal programme run by TWC2 in Singapore's Little India neighbourhood, I also accompanied the men to the Ministry of Manpower and various hospitals to follow up on their case statuses and doctor's appointments respectively. The narratives included here are drawn from both in-depth interviews as well as less the structured conversations that we shared during those 14 months. All of the Bangladeshis with whom I spoke are or have been at some point during their work journey in Singapore on a special pass⁴. This is a permit issued to work-permit holders who have become unemployed as a result of work disputes, usually of the following nature: salary disputes, illegal deployment (work-permit holders are only allowed to work for the employer specified on their work-permit cards) and Workmen's Compensation cases (for illnesses and injuries incurred during work). About 25 of the men I spoke with were on Workmen's Compensation – a figure reflective of the men who turn to the NGOs for help on an individual basis, highlighting not only the dangers these migrants are exposed to on the job but also how atomized they are as individual workers. Special passes are issued by the MOM for foreign workers to legally stay in Singapore while their cases are being investigated. During investigations, however, special pass holders are not eligible for work unless they apply to be on a Temporary Job Scheme (TJS) which is only applicable for workers engaged in salary disputes. Applying for the TJS does not guarantee a job and all Schemes are only valid for six months. NGO directors say that while the pass is a useful step for providing some recourse to workers who run into employment disputes, they note that MOM also seems to have taken a more stringent approach in deciding which cases are eligible for the pass during the time of economic recessions. During investigations as well, the migrant men I spoke with do not live with their employers – even if employers are legally bound to provide them with shelter, in particular migrant men who are claiming Workmen's Compensation. Most fear the forceful repatriation carried out by “security companies” that employers sometimes hire to keep workers in check. In

4 Information on the special pass, unlike the work permit and employment pass, is not made available on the website of the Ministry of Manpower. Inquiries to the Immigration and Checkpoint Authorities (ICA) have also not yielded any official statistics.

essence then, the Bangladeshis I spoke with are homeless and jobless workers who came into Singapore under the work permit system only to have fallen through its cracks. After investigations are over, the pass will be cancelled by MOM and workers will be repatriated within a week of this cancellation. The Bangladeshis I spoke with, therefore, were not examined during their productive circumstances – that is, they are officially not working. They have been rendered jobless and effectively homeless as a result of their enforced transience through the processes that I will examine in the sections that follow. In other words, the situation of Special Pass holders is a result of the very processes that exploited and subordinated them within the division of labour in Singapore and has led many of them to become ultimately marginalized from economic production.

Migrant selves

The economic lives of these Bangladeshi male migrants in Singapore reflect profound structural disparities and uneven development that in many ways render them more vulnerable than other workers to processes and practices of exploitation and subordination, as I have elaborated above. As they enter these circuits of production, however, they also traverse critical arenas of cultural and social reproduction. The politics of class and gender goes beyond these exploitative, structural limitations within the workers' lives. In the choices the workers make, the values they share and the identities they pursue, male migrants from Bangladesh (and elsewhere) are neither passive victims of domination nor simple pawns of structures and processes beyond their control (Mills, 1999). Through their own notions of fulfillment and self-expression, Bangladeshi male migrants also engage powerful meanings about what it means to be a man working in a globalized labour force. Waged work for them is thus intertwined with their gender and nationality, even after they fall out of work.

Masculinity and Mobility

Gender relations are often important, while not the only, factors in explaining and legitimizing the movement of young men to work in Singapore. Whenever the men spoke of their decisions to work in Singapore, it almost always was in relation to their

roles as men in their households. While I do not assume fixity in Bangladeshi gender regimes, I argue that this international mobility is conditioned by and constitutes on-going gender and class relations. As Karim reveals,

Bangladesh no good job for me, so I come to Singapore. I cannot ask my wife to go and work. Because it is not good! Ladies in Bangladeshi don't work – not like in Singapore. If she work, who can take care of my family? I am a man so I must take care of my family. No matter how hard the job, nevermind. I do because I know I must support my father and mother, also my wife and small daughter. And also we paid so much money to my agent so I can come to Singapore for work. He said like other men, I can also come to Singapore to make money to support my family.

Karim is referring to the hefty recruitment fees to here. Each worker pays between SGD\$7000 to SGD\$10,000 to their agents for a work permit job even before they leave Bangladesh. The roundtrip air tickets cost about \$700, passport fees cost \$100 and job training usually cost about \$1,500 (personal interview with director of HOME) – the remaining balance is unaccounted for. The NGO personnel I interviewed believe the rest of the money goes to the employer to offset government-imposed levies, to paying for the upkeep of the worker and also to the agent's personal profit. If it is true that part of the "agent fees" goes towards paying for the workers levies and maintenance, this serves the employer by cheapening labour costs while at the same time creating an atomized and vulnerable worker who, in order to access work, is already in debt even before earning any wages. In this way, the worker is sucked into the exploitative social relations by material circumstances. Almost all the Bangladeshis I interviewed sold off various assets – land, homes, jewelry, – used up savings and took out loans from banks, relatives and/or loansharks to pay for the agent fees. In Marxian terms, to become workers in the global economy, the men sell off their other means of livelihood, putting up only their labour power for sale in return for wages (Burawoy, 1985). To convert labour power – the capacity to work – into labour migrants must first pay a large fee. Clearly for these men, their exploitation and subordination begins even before they start work. I would argue that the precariousness of their work lives is exacerbated as a result of having to pay off these loans (Waite, 2008).

Mannaf, a previous shipyard worker who has been sleeping at a parking lot intermittently for three months while awaiting his Workmen's Compensation Claim tells me,

... last time when I (had) a job, I (sent) maybe 80% of my \$600 (monthly) salary⁵ to Bangladesh. Cannot keep so much salary for myself. My family will be happy if they know I give them my salary. It is my job to my family because I am a man.... Now I cannot tell my family my situation! Sometimes they ask me why I don't send money back but I just say I give money to my friend to start a business here. If they understand my condition in Singapore, my mother and father will get heart attack and my wife will cry everyday. So I one person "tahan"⁶ no problem... If my wife knows, then she go work in a factory – (there are) many men working in factory! What if she sees, and she (thinks), "my husband no use, not sending money back, I want to go and marry another man", then what will happen?

This suggests that masculinity for these Bangladeshi workers continues to be readily constituted within existing patriarchal structures, confirming their resilience and versatility rather than signaling any major shift in the sexual balance of power. As Bourdieu argues in *Masculine Domination*, "gender asymmetries continue to be thrown into visible relief" where gender continues to have a pronounced autonomy vis à vis economic relations (2001). This persistence can be further understood through Bourdieu's notion of the habitus, which is a mechanism that organizes how individuals perceive the social world. At the same time though, this perception is also a result of how people are themselves produced in the division of classes. Further, the habitus is an internalization of one's conditions of existence and is "converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions" (1984: 170). This "feel for the game" functions below conscious reasoning and deliberate will to action to the extent that gives the impression that one's actions, dispositions and attitudes are instinctual rather than conditioned by social forces (McNay, 2000). In this sense, the modus operandi of habitus allows men to view their masculinity and its alleged opposed femininity as innate. The habitus is thus a mechanism that reproduces dispositions that are durable precisely because of its pre-reflexive quality. Masculinity as an uncalculated strategy forms part of the habitus of men that is transposable to given situations to form practical dispositions and actions to everyday situations (Coles, 2009).

5 In 1996, the official average starting wage for workers in these sectors was \$860. This figure fell to \$600 by 2006, a decrease of 30% (The Straits Times, July 28 2007). My fieldwork data also revealed that while this is the official monthly salary, deductions by the employer for electricity, room and board are common amongst many workers in this sector of the economy. Many workers receive less than \$400 a month post-deductions – a wage that is far below the official national average for construction and maritime labourers.

6 This is a Malay word often used in Singapore that means "tolerate".

I add that migration is part and parcel of the social and cultural processes of subjectivation, where the habitus of Bangladeshi men continue to orient themselves in culturally-specific ways. Karim's emphatic claim that it is "not good" for a woman to be working continues to reinforce the standard of a man's role as the economic provider while a woman's role is to take on reproductive labour within the household – indeed, many of the men have told me that the reason they take on work overseas is because they are men and getting used to unfamiliar territory is easier "for a man". This is, as Bourdieu argued, where "social positions themselves (are) sexually characterized and characterizing ... in defending their jobs against feminization, men are trying to protect ... themselves as men, such as manual workers ... which owe much, if not all of their value, even in their (own) eyes, to their image of manliness" (2001: 96). Consequently, a gendered moral framework is reproduced, where good men continue to take on paid work and virtuous women work within the house. This corresponds with Osella and Osella's study of gender and work in Kerala, where gendered divisions of labour not only spatialize men and women differently but also reproduces differentiated notions of morality for men and women (2000). Traditional patterns of masculinity and femininity may be more stretched across space, borders and scales but it would be not be too far-fetched to argue that there is a persistent asymmetry of power between men and women (Jackson, 1991).

The loss of paid employment, then, is experienced often as a threat to the livelihoods of not only the workers and their households but also to their manhood. Indeed, the transposable quality of the habitus functions to silence Mannaf from speaking about his marginalization from economic production with his family. Bearing the responsibility of remitting the money and having the capacity to do so is tied to Mannaf's gender identity. In believing in the primacy granted to masculinity, Mannaf, like many other migrants, is further entrenched within masculine domination himself: limited by the lack of secure employment and exposed to certain vulnerabilities because of his job, he experiences challenges to his values as a Bangladeshi male, as a son and a husband. Similar to the female migrants in Mill's study of Bangkok's rural migrant workers, these tensions underlying the men's labour migration also prompt them to negotiate a series of linked fragile compromises – balancing personal consumption to remit most of their money to Bangladesh, having to keep their homeless and jobless situations a secret from their families and wanting to maintain a particular form of masculine construction in relation to their wives (1999).

The cultural dominance of gender structures illustrates that the experience of class cannot be fully understood without also understanding the permanence of other

social collectivities, even in times of vulnerabilities (Bourdieu, 2001). This also shows the oppressive aspect of masculinity not just towards females, but as experienced by men, as well, as they grapple with precarious lives. Maintaining these delicate roles is possible because of pre-existing gender politics and also a strategy that responds to political-economic conditions and inequalities that restrict their access to material resources and opportunities in Singapore. As these men try to balance structural fractures with dominant cultural discourses and personal values, they experience these disjunctures most sharply as personal misfortune and hardship. Their silence becomes part of their dominated habitus: their hardship in Singapore cannot be seen as sheer passivity but rather, actively contributes to the symbolic violence that rendered them unable to speak of these hardships in the first place. As Bourdieu argues (2001: 38),

the practical knowledge and recognition of the magical frontier between the dominant and the dominated that are triggered by the magic of symbolic power and through which the dominated, often unwittingly, sometimes unwillingly, contribute to their own domination by tacitly accepting the limits imposed, often take the form of bodily emotions – shame, humiliation, timidity, anxiety, guilt...

It would be possible to argue also that these dominant discourses of gender couched within the pursuit of happiness through waged labour motivated them to come to Singapore in the first place, while also obscuring how their hardship is rooted within the exploitative relations of the paid work they can access. These discourses become embodied by the migrants over time, and indeed, they become historicized, through their experiences that are informed by and engage with structures of gender and economic domination (Bourdieu, 2001).

Masculine tastes

In this section, I further explore the gendered linkages between being a low-waged migrant and taste. Classed and gendered attitudes and dispositions manifest, whether consciously or not, in consumption patterns, which further complicates class subjectivities. This does not merely entail an examination of the things low-waged migrants buy, but also what orients their taste towards specific goods. As Bourdieu argues, social collectivities are formed through these consumption choices and orientations, and through their very symbolic power (Weininger, 2004). Indeed, all of the men

with whom I spoke indicated the desire to purchase “Singaporean” goods and bring them back to Bangladesh. As Ishaak explains to me,

Ishaak: I think I will buy some make-up for my wife and shampoo for other ladies in my house and village. For my father, I will buy torchlight.

Jia: Why can't you buy it back in Bangladesh? I think it would be cheaper there, right?

Ishaak: Yes, of course cheaper in Bangladesh! Even buying it at Dhaka airport will be cheaper. But no problem. I am the son that (came) to Singapore to work. People will see that I buy Singapore shampoo and Singapore torchlight. My father will be happy, my wife also happy and my villagers will also think “He had good job in Singapore that's why can buy Singapore things”.

Jia: And why torchlight for your father?

Ishaak: Because my village (doesn't) have electricity 24 hours a day. Sometimes at night, he want to go somewhere, he (needs) a torchlight. Bangladesh (has) torchlight also! But Singapore's torchlight is better I think. All Bangla men buy torchlight for their fathers and brothers when they go back... my villagers will say I am a good son.

As this above conversation shows, there is an “economy of cultural goods, but it has a specific logic” (Bourdieu, 1984: 1). That Ishaak would rather buy apparently mundane items such as shampoo and torchlights in Singapore, despite the higher cost there, suggests the symbolic significance of being able to purchase these goods as well as Ishaak's cultural competence. His taste for these items, while not economically rational even if it is embedded with a clear gendered rationale, is a result of his pre-existing cultural knowledge about which items to get and how to expend his wealth to get symbolic mileage. Through these items, people from Ishaak's village can imply his position in the division of labour (regardless of whether or not it is true). The symbolic properties of these items, indeed, their value, lies within their ability to illustrate conditions of acquisition and are regarded as “attributes of excellence, constitu(ing) one of the key markers of class and also the ideal weapon in strategies of distinction, that is ... the infinitely varied art of marking distances” (Bourdieu, 1984: 66). This illustrates the power relations that create social reproduction in places (Bangladesh) outside of Ishaak's economic production (Singapore). At one level, the lack of electricity in villages is a result of the uneven development inherent in global capitalism – village life and in particular here, taste, are linked the to broader structural political-economy. At another level and while it is not this paper's focus to discuss the reproduction of social classes in sending areas, I nonetheless argue that this illustrates the far-reaching and salient geography of classes. This

continues to show how local encounters with global capitalism must look beyond the imposition of new demands and power relations from the outside but also in light of how this process may be received by workers on the ground who are themselves also occupying positions in different cultural fields.

These consumption choices are made up of people's economic and cultural capital – resources upon which individuals draw to exercise their class identities. People's class habitus – within which are couched gender subjectivities as well – then orient the expenditure of their economic and cultural capital in practical ways that give coherence to a lifestyle, most visibly seen through the notion of taste. A cultural product – the torchlight, shampoo – is a constituted taste, constituted through the process of objectification by the social field in which the agent (in this case, the Bangladeshi worker) occupies a position. Through his consumption of these products, he further legitimizes its objectification, assigning the product and its consumer a prestige, realizing itself as well as its consumer's class identity (Bourdieu, 1984). In other words, Bourdieusian discussions of class move beyond ideas of exploitation within capitalist production and engage with social reproduction through consumption without neglecting people's positions in the realm of material production. The concept of habitus explains why an agent's "whole set of practices (or those of agents produced by similar conditions) are both systematic, inasmuch as they are the product of the application of identical (or interchangeable) schemes and systematically distinct from the practices constituting another lifestyle" (Bourdieu, 1984: 170). Simply put, different conditions create different habitus. Through the concept of habitus, Bourdieu bridges the often (mis)used dichotomy between agency and structure within class practice. It must be kept in mind, however, that the ways in which people consume commodities and ideas reflect more than just the economic. The acquisition or at least yearning to acquire certain goods also serve as symbolic measures of success.

Conclusion

On the one hand, the Bangladeshi men's labour migration highlights the powerful and complex structures of inequality in global capitalism and in Singapore's labour market through the various policies and practices that maintain their economic exploitation and subordination, as I have examined here. As workers enter these new

forms of waged labour, with the precarious conditions of low wages, the close regulation of their (re)productive bodies, their enforced transience and the sheer physical dangers of their jobs, it becomes clear that their work lives are not merely economic in the narrow sense, but, are deeply entrenched within complex social goals and cultural discourses that linger even after they fall out of work. The theoretical framework I have utilized here illustrates how Bourdieu's notion of class – that includes but is not limited to the realm of economic production – is useful in analyzing the empirical case study. Through the notion of the habitus, we see that these are individuals who operate as subjects engaging with, rather than being passive receptors of, social constructs such as class and gender. As Enloe argues, "...without women's own needs, values and worries, the global assembly line would grind to a halt" (1989: 16-17, quoted in Mills, 1999). My argument shows that this needs to be extended to include discussions of masculinity and its intersections with class subjectivities as well. The intertwined subjectivities of Bangladeshi masculinity and class are constitutive of, rather than a preceding fixity of, the labour migrant experience. Despite and perhaps precisely because of their exclusion from the material benefits of work and, finally, because of being special pass holders, Bangladeshi migrant workers continue to grapple with dominant narratives of gender and modernity.

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