

# The Impact of Seasonal Migration on Gender and Social Norms

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## Abstract

In rural areas in developing countries, the period between planting and harvest is generally characterized by low wages, few employment opportunities, and, consequently, skipped meals and hunger among the rural poor. Temporary migration in search of labor opportunities is a common coping strategy in this context, and, every year, about one-third of poor rural households in Northern Bangladesh send a migrant to other parts of the country for seasonal work. In this study, we investigate whether this pattern of seasonal migration affects gender and social norms in places of origin. We base our analysis on a randomized control trial (RCT) offering migration subsidies to over 5,000 households across 133 villages in Bangladesh, inducing an increase in migration of 25-40 percentage points in treated villages. Despite these large effects on migration, we do not find evidence of impacts on gender or social norms (including decision-making power within the household, political beliefs and participation, latrine usage and reported consumption of vice goods) in villages of origin. Rather, when focusing on gender norms, we observe that, while women have more freedom of movement while their spouses are away, their spheres shrink back once their husbands return. Altogether, these results indicate that norms are deeply entrenched and, given already high levels of temporary migration from the region, unlikely to change in response to induced migration.

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## Background

Previous (and ongoing) research on No Lean Season has provided solid evidence that offering subsidies for migration increases not only migration rates, but also household income, consumption, and caloric intake (Bryan et al. 2014; Akram et al. 2017). An analysis of welfare changes due to migration (Lagakos et al. 2017) also shows that, while these gains are slightly tempered by the disutility of migration and a temporary split of the household, they benefit the most needy households and improve their welfare during the lean season.

Previous research has already shown that the overwhelming majority of seasonal migrants in Bangladesh and through No Lean Season are male, and heads of household. Considering the strong effect of NLS on male out-migration, a natural follow-up question is whether the temporary migration of men from rural areas changes gender and social norms in areas of origin. That is, when men leave their social context and are exposed to different ideas at their destinations, and women are temporarily left behind and experience a relative expansion of their decision-making spheres, does this lead to any changes in roles or attitudes at the end of the migration episode? Here, we consider both local norms as they relate to gender – which may be affected through both exposure to ideas at destination areas as well as a temporary shift in household responsibilities during the migration spell – and other social norms, political beliefs and attitudes, such as those regarding inequality, justice, and democracy.

To explore the impact of No Lean Season on social norms, we use data from the 2014 RCT and the follow-up survey conducted in 2016. The first dataset – and main one used here – is the endline survey to the 2014 RCT on spillovers, which was collected in April-May 2015, after the relevant lean season ended. In November 2016, a follow-up survey was conducted with the same households to assess the longer term effects of the intervention. We use some data from the follow-up to validate and assist in the interpretation of our results.

## Questions and Content

For our analysis on the impact of seasonal migration and NLS on gender norms, we rely on a rich module within the 2014 survey. It includes commonly used questions regarding decision-making roles with respect to expenditures (on oneself and one's children) and female physical mobility, but is unique in that a man as well as a woman in each household was asked this set of questions. Table 1 below presents the

list of questions, along with the distribution of responses.<sup>1</sup> The first three questions (rows) relate to expenditures for oneself; the following four relate to expenditures for children in the household (if applicable); and the final four questions relate to women’s freedom of movement. According to both women and men, expenditure decisions are most likely to be joint decisions within the household, though men are more likely to say they decide on expenditures for their own food, healthcare, and clothing by themselves than are women. Female mobility, however, is less likely to be a joint decision, and responses are generally evenly distributed between those where decisions are made by both men and women together and where they are made by men alone. The responses are generally consistent between male and female respondents.

**Table 1. Participation in Spheres of Decision-Making**

Decision-Makers:	female response			male response		
	women alone	joint	men alone	women alone	joint	men alone
Exp, Self: Food	0.21	0.58	0.19	0.11	0.52	0.35
Exp, Self: Health Care	0.08	0.65	0.24	0.03	0.56	0.38
Exp, Self: Clothing	0.06	0.67	0.24	0.01	0.53	0.43
Exp, Children: Food	0.21	0.67	0.09	0.15	0.67	0.16
Exp, Children: Health Care	0.09	0.77	0.11	0.05	0.77	0.16
Exp, Children: Education	0.08	0.82	0.07	0.05	0.82	0.11
Exp, Children: Clothing	0.05	0.76	0.14	0.03	0.76	0.18
Fem Mob: Outside Community	0.11	0.39	0.48	0.10	0.39	0.50
Fem Mob: Bazaar	0.14	0.42	0.42	0.12	0.43	0.45
Fem Mob: Hospital/Doctor	0.18	0.43	0.36	0.19	0.41	0.38
Fem Mob: NGO/programs	0.10	0.51	0.37	0.10	0.49	0.40

In the survey, we also asked women about threats and violence they may have been subjected to by their husbands and/or other family members during the 6 months preceding the survey.<sup>2</sup> A small share of women (4%) reported that their husbands either threatened them with divorce or taking another wife or acted on that threat during the previous 6 months. In contrast to this somewhat rare occurrence, more than half of women reported being verbally abused by their spouse or other family members, and 10% reported physical abuse within the last 6 months.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For relevance, the sample used for this table is limited to households with at least one adult male (age 18 or older). Less than 5% of households in the 2014 dataset do not match this criteria, and are dropped from this table and subsequent analysis on gender. They are nonetheless included in the rest of the analysis herein.

<sup>2</sup> This period, starting in mid-September, encompasses the lean season and harvest time.

<sup>3</sup> Note here that we are very aware of the literature discussing the challenge of measuring violence and abuse through self-reported data. Nonetheless, the tendency to underreport these cases is only an issue for our analysis if there is a systematic difference in this tendency between treated and untreated households. We have no reason to believe this is the case.

**Table 2. Threats, Violence, and Relationships**

female response	
<b>Has your husband/other family member ever: (share “Yes”)</b>	
Threatened You with Divorce/Other Wife	0.04
Verbally Abused You	0.57
Physically Abused You	0.11
<b>Do you feel that your partner's migration has impacted your relationship...</b>	
Negatively	0.00
Positively	0.09
No impact	0.41
N/A	0.50

Lastly, we asked women their perception of the impact of their partner’s migration on their relationship. Among women whose partners migrated during the lean season (50%), the vast majority reported that the migration itself had no impact on their relationship (consistent with the preliminary results we gather). That said, one in five women felt it had a positive impact on their relationship, and, reassuringly, less than 1% reported a perceived negative impact.

The next set of questions (Table 3) were asked to the head of the household, who in the vast majority of cases (94%) is male and is usually among the migrants in the household.<sup>4</sup> Despite the gender norms described above, almost all respondents reported that they know of women who are capable of running the household without their husband’s assistance. Similarly, most reported knowing women who have a good understanding of politics and government.

Most of the questions in this set relate to civic engagement and access to services, particularly at the local level. Interviewees were asked about their use of services traditionally provided by their union parishad, a small administrative unit usually covering a handful of villages. Unlike many other developing country contexts, almost all respondents in this sample have received a voter ID card as well as a birth certificate from this entity. In fact, engagement with the union parishad seems to be quite common, as over half of households have gone through local arbitration with the union parishad within the previous year, and half talked to the union parishad chief within the previous 6 months.

Reported political participation is also very high in this area, both in terms of reported voting rates for Parliament (96%) and in terms of politicians’ campaign efforts. The vast majority of respondents noted that, during the 2014 election, politicians put up signs, held rallies, and distributed gifts in their village.

<sup>4</sup> In the entire sample, among households that had a migrant, 89% reported the household head as one of the migrants.

**Table 3. Political Beliefs and Civic Participation**

Household head response (% Yes)	
Have you seen a woman working outside the home for a salary?	1.00
Have you met a woman who is capable of managing household affairs without help from her husband?	0.98
Have you met women who has a good understanding of politics and government?	0.88
Have you ever received a ration card from your union parishad?	0.47
Have you ever received a voter card from your union parishad?	0.99
Have you ever received a national ID card from your union parishad?	0.52
Have you ever received a birth certificate from your union parishad?	0.98
Have you ever received a trade license from your union parishad?	0.03
In the past year, did you receive food or money in return for work (e.g. digging canal, building roads) from your union parishad?	0.09
In the past year, did you receive assistance with a local arbitration (shalish) from your union parishad?	0.61
Did you vote in the last Member of Parliament election held in 2014?	0.96
During these elections, did you have a conversation with a party worker or candidate?	0.97
Have you had a conversation with the union parishad chairman in the past 6 months?	0.53
Are you a member of any of the labor union?	0.02
Are you a member of any of the farmer's association?	0.01
Is there a political party you especially like?	0.68
In the last elections, did political party works or candidates:	
Hold a meeting or rally in the village?	0.97
Put up posters or signs in the village?	1.00
Offer people in the village gifts such as food, tea, clothes?	0.91
Did most people accept such gifts? (Yes="most" or "everyone" accepted)	0.65
Do you agree or disagree with the following statements (share agree)	
Government should reduce differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes.	0.82
Government should help the poor by providing them a job.	1.00
Political parties should help the poor by giving them some gift in return for their vote.	0.26

The last set of questions included in this section relate to political beliefs on equality and the role of government. The majority of respondents believe that it is the government's responsibility to reduce income inequality, and virtually all believe the government should provide jobs to the poor. In contrast, 26% of respondents agree that political parties should buy votes from the poor in exchange for gifts.

Finally, we consider latrine usage and the use of vice goods, though we understand that these are a function of not only norms, but also of various other factors, including access, income, and intra-household bargaining. We find that most households in our sample own a toilet, but that only 24% have a toilet within or attached to their home. When it comes to less desirable options, such as community toilets and open defecation, men and children are much more likely than women to use these in lieu of a toilet.

**Table 4. Latrine Usage and Vice Goods**

Household head response (% Yes)	
Does the household have access to a usable toilet?	0.96
Does the household own a toilet (solely or with another family)?	0.86
Is the household's primary toilet located within or attached to the home?	0.24

Do members of the household use:	
Community toilet (Men)	0.49
Community toilet (Women)	0.23
Community toilet (Children)	0.72
Open spaces/bushes/hanging latrine (Men)	0.36
Open spaces/bushes/hanging latrine (Women)	0.09
Open spaces/bushes/hanging latrine (Children)	0.57
Do you currently smoke cigarettes, hookah, other?	0.66
Do you currently drink alcohol?	0.00

Perhaps as expected for this context, less than 1% of respondents reported drinking alcohol, though two-thirds smoke cigarettes, hookah, or other devices.

## Early Results

In this section, we present early results from our analysis. Overall, it appears that No Lean Season does not have a statistically significant effect on gender and social norms, at least in the short run. This is reassuring, and consistent with the fact that, as discussed in other documents, seasonal migration is already very common among rural poor households in Bangladesh, with one-third of households sending at least one temporary migrant in any given lean season, and the majority of households having experienced at least one spell of migration over a three year period. As such, poor rural households are generally already familiar with urban attitudes and norms. Other mitigating factors may also include the fact that migrants often travel, work, and live with other migrants from their village, limiting their integration in destination areas; that seasonal migration is roughly evenly distributed between urban destinations and other rural destinations; and that norms in urban areas may not be dramatically different from rural ones, particularly among the poor.

The following tables present a summary of the regressions associated with the descriptive tables shown previously. Each of these tables present only the coefficient for treatment in 2014, though the regressions are run with controls for upazila of residence as well as respondent age, and errors are clustered at the village level. Note here that, given the 2014 No Lean Season design, there are actually three broad arms: (1) treated, (2) untreated households in villages where others received treatment, (3) untreated households in control villages.<sup>5</sup> In all of the regressions in this section we only use groups 1 and 3, ignoring the intermediary group 2, who could be affected through spillovers from the first group though they were not directly offered the migration loan. In other specifications not included in this document, we consider

<sup>5</sup> More precisely, there are actually five arms, since the share of treated households comprised either 0%, 10%, or 50% of eligible households in each village.

spillovers (though it is a priori unlikely that we would observe spillover effects if we do not observe significant direct effects on the treated groups, as detailed here) as well as local average treatment effects (LATE). The coefficients shown in this document are all intent-to-treat (ITT) effects. We have not adjusted for multiple hypothesis testing at this stage, but note that the relevant alpha levels would likely be smaller once this is done.

To interpret the tables below, consider that a regression was run for each outcome (e.g., women decide alone on the expenditure on food for themselves), controlling for upazila and respondent age, and only the coefficient of the treatment dummy is reported. Table 5, for example, presents the coefficient for treatment from 66 (=11 x 6) different regressions. Standard errors for the coefficient are reported in parenthesis and asterisks are used at the conventional levels. As can be seen, only 3 out of these coefficients are statistically significant at the 10% level.

**Table 5. Regression Results: Participation in Spheres of Decision-Making**

Decision-Makers:	female response			male response		
	women alone	women participate	men alone	women alone	Women participate	men alone
Exp, Self: Food	0.0119 (0.0209)	-0.0382 (0.0219)	0.0352 (0.0215)	0.0168 (0.0154)	-0.0316 (0.0237)	0.0327 (0.0236)
Exp, Self: Health Care	0.00999 (0.0131)	-0.0414 (0.0219)	0.0350 (0.0228)	0.0131* (0.00640)	-0.0269 (0.0268)	0.0313 (0.0278)
Exp, Self: Clothing	0.00495 (0.0120)	-0.0130 (0.0263)	0.00926 (0.0259)	0.00499 (0.00524)	-0.0244 (0.0254)	0.0308 (0.0251)
Exp, Children: Food	-0.0261 (0.0231)	-0.0120 (0.0179)	0.0131 (0.0165)	-0.0198 (0.0203)	-0.00666 (0.0260)	0.00868 (0.0238)
Exp, Children: Health Care	-0.00831 (0.0167)	-0.0134 (0.0213)	0.0100 (0.0203)	0.00770 (0.0103)	0.000389 (0.0212)	0.000124 (0.0192)
Exp, Children: Education	-0.000589 (0.0151)	-0.00287 (0.0175)	0.00479 (0.0157)	0.00308 (0.0113)	-0.0291 (0.0204)	0.0236 (0.0174)
Exp, Children: Clothing	-0.00441 (0.0110)	-0.00157 (0.0252)	0.00616 (0.0233)	0.00409 (0.00879)	-0.000341 (0.0250)	0.00618 (0.0216)
Fem Mob: Outside Community	-0.0142 (0.0203)	-0.0371 (0.0253)	0.0356 (0.0254)	-0.0191 (0.0188)	-0.0258 (0.0257)	0.0313 (0.0260)
Fem Mob: Bazaar	-0.0295 (0.0360)	0.0302 (0.0401)	-0.0130 (0.0423)	-0.00542 (0.0341)	0.0240 (0.0395)	0.000457 (0.0421)
Fem Mob: Hospital/Doctor	-0.00659 (0.0192)	-0.0485* (0.0220)	0.0435* (0.0215)	-0.000418 (0.0189)	-0.0276 (0.0265)	0.0344 (0.0269)
Fem Mob: NGO/programs	-0.00662 (0.0170)	0.00219 (0.0268)	0.000680 (0.0267)	-0.00724 (0.0189)	0.0128 (0.0268)	-0.00898 (0.0284)

We follow the same approach when considering the effect of treatment on threats and violence experienced by female respondents. The point estimates are all very small, and none are statistically significant.

We use an ordered logistic regression to tackle the question of whether the female respondent feels that her partner’s migration has impacted the relationship, though one should keep in mind that the presented estimate is actually biased and imprecise, since households that reported no migration in the previous lean season did not respond to this question.

**Table 6. Regression Results: Threats, Violence, and Relationships**

female response	
Has your husband/other family member ever: (% Yes)	
Threatened You with Divorce/Other Wife	0.00845 (0.00998)
Verbally Abused You	-0.0103 (0.0316)
Physically Abused You	-0.0144 (0.0146)
Do you feel that your partner's migration has impacted your relationship... negatively, no impact, positively?,	
Ordered logit coefficient	0.336 (0.241)

In the regressions for political beliefs, a few of the coefficients on the treatment variable are significant at the 10% level, but, again, none are significant at the 5% level or higher. Also note that questions generating this marginal significance tend to be those with largely homogenous responses. For example, 98% of all respondents said they know a “woman who is capable of managing household affairs without help from her husband”. So, a difference of just a handful of respondents on either side tends to lead to these marginally significant coefficients.

**Table 7. Regression Results: Political Beliefs and Civic Participation**

Household head response (% Yes)	
Have you seen a woman working outside the home for a salary?	0.00944 (0.00679)
Have you met a woman who is capable of managing household affairs without help from her husband?	0.0219* (0.00910)
Have you met women who has a good understanding of politics and government?	-0.00144 (0.0165)
Have you ever received a ration card from your union parishad?	-0.0270 (0.0364)
Have you ever received a voter card from your union parishad?	-0.00937 (0.00512)
Have you ever received a national ID card from your union parishad?	0.0444 (0.0273)
Have you ever received a birth certificate from your union parishad?	0.0105 (0.00792)
Have you ever received a trade license from your union parishad?	-0.00253 (0.00772)
In the past year, did you receive food or money in return for work (e.g. digging canal, building roads) from your union parishad?	-0.0163 (0.0160)
In the past year, did you receive assistance with a local arbitration (shalish) from your union parishad?	-0.00319 (0.0227)
Did you vote in the last Member of Parliament election held in 2014?	-0.00437 (0.00859)
During these elections, did you have a conversation with a party worker or candidate?	-0.00928 (0.00941)
Have you had a conversation with the union parishad chairman in the past 6 months?	-0.00524 (0.0324)
Are you a member of any of the labor union?	-0.00324 (0.00871)



Are you a member of any of the farmer's association?	-0.00376 (0.00585)
Is there a political party you especially like?	0.00106 (0.0261)
In the last selections, did political party works or candidates:	
Hold a meeting or rally in the village?	-0.0189* (0.00855)
Put up posters or signs in the village?	-0.00428 (0.00252)
Offer people in the village gifts such as food, tea, clothes?	-0.0376* (0.0167)
Did most people accept such gifts? (Yes="most" or "everyone" accepted)	0.0729* (0.0308)
Do you agree or disagree with the following statements (% agree)	
Government should reduce differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes.	0.0480* (0.0204)
Government should help the poor by providing them a job.	-0.000110 (0.00192)
Political parties should help the poor by giving them some gift in return for their vote.	-0.0651* (0.0313)

Finally, the regression output for latrine usage and vice goods also do not reveal any statistically significant impact from financial incentives to migration. The coefficients on the treatment dummy are generally small in magnitude, and none of them are statistically significant.

**Table 8. Regression Results: Latrine Usage and Vice Goods**

Household head response (% Yes)	
Does the household have access to a usable toilet?	0.000230 (0.0109)
Does the household own a toilet (solely or with another family)?	-0.0157 (0.0174)
Is the household's primary toilet located within the home?	0.0184 (0.0207)
Do members of the household use:	
Community toilet (Men)	-0.00426 (0.0237)
Community toilet (Women)	0.0214 (0.0193)
Community toilet (Children)	-0.0382 (0.0227)
Open spaces/bushes/hanging latrine (Men)	-0.0528 (0.0293)
Open spaces/bushes/hanging latrine (Women)	0.000269 (0.0156)
Open spaces/bushes/hanging latrine (Children)	-0.0143 (0.0265)
Do you currently smoke cigarettes, hookah, other?	0.0107 (0.0262)
Do you currently drink alcohol?	0.00198 (0.00112)

In thinking about the results described above, it is important to remember that the survey used to collect this data was deployed after the 2014/2015 lean season, once most migrants had returned home.

Therefore, what we have shown here is that there are no significant impacts from seasonal migration incentives on gender and social norms *by the end of the lean season*. That is not to say that there aren't

differences between migrant and non-migrant households during the lean season, however. In fact, a follow-up survey from 2016 reveals a temporary shift in gender norms during migration; migrants stated that their wives have a lot more physical freedom and decision-making responsibilities during their migration, though this reverts back once the migrant returns.

The first two sets of columns in Table 9 shows the distribution of responses among those who migrated in the previous (2015/2016) lean season, both during the lean season and when they are home. While 43% of them said their wives decide by themselves on household expenses while the respondent is away, only 2% said their wives are the sole decision-makers on the same issue when the respondent is home. In contrast, 81% of respondents said that, outside the migration period, men are the sole decision-makers for household expenditures.

By design, the set of questions regarding decision-making during migration was only asked of migrant households, though all respondents were asked about decision-making while they are present<sup>6</sup>. The last 3 columns in Table 9 show responses for the entire sample.

Notably, responses in this survey are much less likely to indicate that the decisions were made jointly, compared to the 2014 round. One possible (and partial) explanation is that migrants were first asked about decision-making during their absence, when joint decision-making is unlikely, so that it prompted an “overcompensation” in the second set of questions, as they sought to assert that they were nonetheless the primary decision-makers in their household most of the time. Another might be that, in the 2014 survey, respondents knew that their wives were also being interviewed, so may have felt pressure to show more inclusivity, whether reflecting the truth or not. Nevertheless, we do note that the distribution of responses tend to be quite different from 2014, when joint decision-making was around 40% in each of the dimensions of female physical mobility.<sup>7</sup>

**Table 9. Spheres of Decision-Making, during migration and not (2016 data)**

Decision-makers:	when migrate			when home (migrants only)			when home (all)		
	women alone	joint	men alone	women alone	joint	men alone	women alone	joint	men alone
Exp: Household expenses	0.43	0.16	0.40	0.02	0.17	0.81	0.08	0.20	0.72
Fem Mob: Outside Community	0.20	0.18	0.61	0.04	0.19	0.77	0.10	0.20	0.70

<sup>6</sup> The two scenarios were framed as “if you were to migrate...” and “if you were in the village...”, respectively. Only migrants were asked about decision-making in the former scenario, though all respondents were asked about the latter.

<sup>7</sup> A final explanation may be a true change in gender norms during the period, as the 2016 survey is a follow-up survey applied to a subset of households interviewed in 2014. In the absence of any other evidence as well as competing explanations, this seems unlikely though possible.

Fem Mob: Bazaar	0.26	0.13	0.60	0.03	0.14	0.84	0.09	0.14	0.77
Fem Mob: Hospital/Doctor	0.26	0.17	0.57	0.03	0.22	0.75	0.09	0.22	0.69
Fem Mob: NGO/programs	0.20	0.16	0.64	0.04	0.18	0.78	0.10	0.17	0.73

Nevertheless, despite differences between the 2014 and 2016 results, we can gather from this later dataset alone that decision-making differs between the migration period and otherwise. When respondents are away, as many as one in five women become the sole decision-makers of their freedom of movement, a very rare phenomenon when migrants are home.

Though our data on social and gender norms from 2016 is limited to this set of questions comparing the migration and non-migration period, these descriptives on gender lend more credibility to our regression results. Altogether, we find that social and gender norms do not appear to be changed by incentives to migration once the lean season is over *even though* (1) we know that the incentives have an impact on migration and (2) gender roles change during the migration period. That is, we can reject the idea that we are achieving no impact on migration so, of course, norms are unchanged; as well as the possibility that the questions used are unable to capture any differences in roles or norms at all.

## Closing Comments

This document was written to provide a summary of the early results of research on the impacts of providing financial support for seasonal migration in Bangladesh on gender and social norms. The research paper will present results from more specifications of the econometric model, including the local average treatment effects (LATE), and from differentiating between the different classes of treatment that resulted from the intricate design of the 2014 RCT, and adjust for multiple hypothesis testing.

Nevertheless, preliminary results using these considerations are consistent with the results contained here, showing generally no impact from the intervention on roles, attitudes, or beliefs.

With respect to No Lean Season, these results reassure us that it is unlikely that the program will have any lasting negative effects on gender and social norms. There may be a temporary effect of the program on gender roles and female empowerment, as shown with the 2016 data, though whether it is positive or negative is actually highly debatable. On one hand, it may represent an additional burden on women during male absence, as they have to run the household alone and may nonetheless be stigmatized by society for having to run chores outside their homes by themselves. On the other, women may benefit from greater levels of freedom or empowerment during that period, potentially leading to positive changes in the long run.

In the coming 2017 RCT, we plan to further investigate the effect of No Lean Season on social norms, particularly as it scales up. And just as importantly, while the analysis thus far has been limited to the impact on villages of origin, we intend to study whether the influx of rural migrants might change political attitudes and beliefs among the population at destination areas as well.

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