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Affective assemblages of kinship and single mothers' labour migration from a 'climate hotspot'

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In coastal Bangladesh, 'affective assemblages of kinship' produce differential abilities for landless single mothers to migrate to brick kilns, the garment industry, and the Gulf. This group of women who return to their natal homes as a response to violence or abandonment is neglected by anthropologists of kinship and migration. Thinking of assemblages of kinship as open-ended gatherings enables us to move away from fixed genealogical constructs of patrilineal and virilocal households and to theorize how different people may join or leave a kinship assemblage based on the fluctuations of emotional bonds over time. A rapidly changing socioeconomic landscape has contributed towards the unkinning of returning sisters from failed marriages, shifting filial duties, and matrifocal living. Such 'divorced' women make new kin through unofficial romantic partners, with whom they may choose to migrate together as a means to exert emotional agency. Thinking through 'affective assemblages of kinship' via single mothers reveals the gendered complexities of rural labour migration – of economic and affective-sexual-moral considerations – and how it is contingent on social reproductive support. Such an ethnographic corrective towards reductive explanations of climate-induced migration and the vulnerability of 'female-headed households' shows the importance of anthropology in understanding complex phenomena in a world undergoing rapid socioenvironmental change.

Yasmine[1] lives in a village suffering from salinity caused by tiger prawn cultivation in Lonanodi in the embanked floodplain of Nodi (river) located in southwest coastal Bangladesh. She was raised by her mother along with eight sisters and two younger brothers. After her husband married another woman and left her and their baby daughter, Yasmine returned to her natal home. I met Yasmine while she was working on a two-year donor-funded rural employment scheme to repair local earthen roads. Such earthworking groups were often called Labour Contracting Societies (LCS) and targeted landless 'female-headed households' (FHHs, women without husbands or adult males providing for them). In June 2014, the two LCS groups I had spent most time with since October 2014 were worried that their soon-expiring project contract would not be renewed and that they would lose their main source of income. Compared to her devastated LCS colleagues, Yasmine seemed relaxed and said: 'Once the project ends,

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I will go to the brick kilns. I can earn a lot of money'. I knew that prior to working in this LCS, Yasmine migrated to the brick kilns each year and spent six months there at a time. It was only a few months after I had left Bangladesh that she introduced me to her *bariwallah* (colloq. husband) on the phone, sharing her secret. They lived as husband and wife working in the brick kilns, far away from their own *samaj* (local moral society), clarifying Yasmine's enthusiasm to migrate. For Yasmine, who was married off when she was 12 and abandoned by her husband when her daughter was born, this romantic relationship was one that she chose for herself as an adult woman. It provided an important incentive for migration, while ensuring personal security among strangers in a patriarchal space. Furthermore, having the support of her sisters, her younger sisters-in-laws, and her own mother, who all 'ate together',[2] she felt her adolescent daughter was in good hands.

In a rural society where the absence of a male equals poor and weak (Kabeer 1989; Lewis 1993), 'divorced'[3] single mothers like Yasmine are categorized as 'woman household heads' and are viewed by the state and NGOs as 'isolated, marginalized and burdens to their extended families' (P.M.M. Rahman, Matsui & Ikemoto 2009). However, 'women household heads' consist of a diverse group of heterogeneous women whose disadvantages will vary with different life stages and economic positioning (Gardner 2009; Moore 1994: 14). Rather than being isolated, single mothers like Yasmine are embedded in wider kinship relations where either affective bonds with their own parents, grandparents, and siblings can provide crucial social reproductive support enabling migration, or the lack of such support makes it impossible to migrate for work since they have no one to care for their children. Since Schneider's (1984) critique of Eurocentric kinship models assuming blood as a substance of kinship, anthropologists have moved away from genealogical models of kinship and the 'traffic of women' that focused on marriage exchange and descent. However, mainstream media and NGO literature on development still represent Bangladeshi women as mothers and wives rather than actors in their own right (Cornwall 2015) and thus pay little attention to the importance of kinship relations sustaining everyday life beyond that of virilocal and patrilineal households.

This article seeks to nuance such dominant reductive portrayals of Global South Muslim women by drawing on anthropological scholarship on kinship as a process of becoming (Carsten 2016) enacted through conscious human effort (such as feeding, eating together, and sharing) to generate bonds of corporeal substantiality (Carsten 1997; 2004; Viveiros de Castro 2009: 257). In this article, I expand on this by illustrating how the practice of 'eating together' with matrifocal kin and romantic partners also generates strong affective kinship ties, while single mothers who 'eat separately' from their brothers may be subject to 'unkinning'. Tsing (2015: 22-3) suggests that the use of 'assemblages' can be used to get around the fixed and bounded connotations of ecological 'community', while Collier and Ong suggest that an assemblage is the product of a multiple determinations that are not reducible to a single logic and implies forms that are shifting and in formation as well as 'heterogeneous, contingent, unstable, partial and situated' (2005: 12). Combining these insights, I argue that anthropologists can make use of the concept of assemblage to move away from fixities of genealogical models of kinship to better understand how different people may leave and enter a kinship assemblage as time and feelings pass. I propose that 'affective assemblages of *kinship*' are open-ended gatherings that are heterogeneous, shifting, and in formation. They are shaped by the material and emotional bonds that are co-exchanged between

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consanguines, affines, friends, and potential new romantic partners. This can result in kin both thwarting each other and coming together and supporting each other (see also Tsing 2015: 22).

Understanding the dynamism and fluctuation of kinship relations is key to understanding gendered challenges in Nodi, where most women are first married off between the ages of 12 and 14. They are expected to move to their husband's home to live as part of a patrilocal joint family that 'eats together'. Such child marriage, as well as dowry-related violence, remains common in Nodi and contributes to a significant number of girls and women returning to their natal homes with their children (Dewan 2021). Among the twenty earthworking women I interacted with regularly, single mothers like Yasmine, Salma, Lipi, Chameli, and Sahira had returned to their natal home after desertion by their husbands and were now 'eating together' with their widowed or 'divorced' elder mothers – fitting the pattern of matrifocal living. In Bangla, cooking, feeding, and sharing food express feelings of *jatno* (care), *koshto* (effort, hardship[4]), and *ador*/*maya*/*bhalobhasha* (love) (Lamb 2000). Eating together thus entails sharing social reproductive labour as a form of care and constitutes 'kin-work': the affective labour that engenders kinship relations through intentional acts (Miller 2018). Focusing on the under-researched perspective of single mothers as potential migrants not only helps us rethink migration by including those who have yet not migrated (Elliot 2021), it also helps us reimagine kinship as dynamic open-ended gatherings shaped by acts of affect expressed through eating together with matrilineal kin. This allows us to move away from the fixed, stable, and 'traditional' patrilineal family models we associate with rural South Asia, while enabling us to better understand the complex social dynamics shaping gendered migration choices.

Existing anthropological studies examining the interconnections between kinship and migration tend to focus on the use of marriage as a means of transnational migration (Andrikopoulos & Duyvendak 2020; Gardner 2008; Groes & Fernandez 2018) and where migrants channel new resources (remittances) to biological kinship networks at home (Andrikopoulos 2022). These processes are described as 'affective circuits' through the exchange of different material and emotive resources across national borders (Cole & Groes 2016). Such focus on marriage and virilocal patriliny is also evident in the South Asian literature on migration and kinship, where male migration is enabled by patrilineal kinship networks (Kuhn 2003; Mosse *et al.* 2002; Osella & Osella 2006; Rogaly *et al.* 2003) and their supporting wives who stay at home (Gardner 2006; Zharkevich 2019). Such affective circuits play a role in the importance of male migrants sending remittances to their patrilocal homes in order to fulfil their filial duties and gain respect among patrikin (Wright 2020).

Shifting our focus to landless single mothers through the frame of affective assemblages of kinship nuances anthropological theories of kinship and migration by highlighting how relationships are dynamic and transcend the expectations and limits of kinship through blood and marriage. Such an approach enables us to analytically include unofficial romantic partners whom women choose to migrate together with but who they may simultaneously keep hidden from their kin and *samaj*. Lastly, it helps us to better understand the role affective kinship relations play in the diverging migration decisions of seemingly similar women of the same (low) socioeconomic class, especially in a rural and conservative society (see also White 1992).

While there is anthropological literature on migration and kinship in Bangladesh, very few ethnographic studies to date have considered the role of affect and kinship

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Figure 1. Screenshot 'Women suffer the most from climate displacement' (Sarkar 2020). Article published in *India Climate Dialogue*. Photo by Inzamamul Haque.

shaping Bangladeshi women's labour migration. Rather, climate change is often described as the main driver of women's migration in existing social science literature (see, e.g., Evertsen & van der Geest 2020; Shahid Sams 2019; Tripathy Furlong, Adams, Boas, Warner & Van Dijk 2022), and which is also captured in the magazine article pictured in Figure 1. Such explanations both misread socioenvironmental vulnerabilities and ignore the historical importance of migration as a gendered livelihood strategy (Dewan 2023). This article directly refutes climate reductive translations of migration through the frame of affective assemblages of kinship. Expanding on the idea that affect shapes labour practices *at* work (Kikon & Karlsson 2019; Mankekar & Gupta 2016), I argue that affect also shapes women's migration *for* labour to key sites of capitalist production both transnationally and domestically. By demonstrating how affective assemblages of kinship are integral in shaping the social reproduction required for women's labour migration, and in shaping migration destinations, this article contributes to anthropological debates on how kinship shapes the functioning of capitalism (Bear 2013; Leivestad 2021; Schober 2021; Yanagisako 2002; 2013).

Though this ethnographic case may be regional, the concept of affective assemblages of kinship helps us to understand global processes of the 'feminization of kinship' (Jackson 2015) and emphasizes affect in going beyond genealogical kinship (Govindrajan 2018). It builds on a growing body of ethnographies that show how

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matrifocal reproductive support enables women to be workers: from the Middle East (Cairoli 2011), South Africa (Jackson 2015), and China (Feuchtwang & Bruckermann 2016: 71-95) to Latin America (Yates-Doerr 2011) and the Caribbean (Quinlan 2006). By bringing to light the importance of daughter-mother-granddaughter bonds in creating trust to take care of one's child[5] as well as the hidden intimate relations in shaping landless single mothers' migration choices, this article also contributes to scholarship writing against patrilocal understandings of kinship (Donner 2015; Graf 2024; Grover 2009; Vera-Sanso 1999).

This article first discusses Bengali ideas of household, kinship, and affect expressed through 'eating separately' and 'eating together' as opposite ends of affective assemblages of kinship: from unkinning due to socioeconomic transformations emerging from 'dark sides of kinship' to the emergence of multigenerational and matrifocal 'eating together'. Second, considering informal extra-marital relations as kinship illustrates how romantic motivations influence decisions to migrate seasonally to rural brick kilns or to work in Dhaka's garment industry. Lastly, the stigma facing domestic workers migrating to the Gulf reveals the importance of social reputation in the *samaj*, and how one's assemblages of kinship also include male kin affected by the movement of female kin. In conclusion, affective assemblages of kinship help to explain why some women and not others are able to migrate. Such choices may be driven by emotional considerations rather than solely aspirations of higher income or – as popular depictions may have it – due to climate change.

The study draws on twelve months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork from August 2014 to July 2015 in Dhaka, Khulna city, and the embanked floodplain of Nodi in southwest coastal Bangladesh. The latter mainly included participant observation of village life in the two unions of Nodi: Lonanodi, where brackish tiger prawn cultivation was dominant, and Dhanmarti, where a grassroots movement ended it. The women from the two LCS groups became my main interlocutors and I hired Moushumi in Dhanmarti and Rozina's sister-in-law in Lonanodi as my field assistants to go door-to-door and carry out a qualitative household survey (*jorib*) with approximately four hundred households across Nodi. I also spent whole days with my motorcycle driver Hassan's wife and his female neighbours as well as with Lakshmi, who worked on a different LCS project. Spending whole days alone with the women and their families further facilitated participant observation, where I tried to immerse myself into rural life.[6]

Affective assemblages of kinship and the anthropology of kinship

'Eating together' vs 'eating separately'

Lipi was one of Yasmine's LCS colleagues who was also a single mother of a teenage daughter living in saline Lonanodi. She suffered much violence and abuse early on during her first marriage and decided to return home with her daughter. After the death of her father, the mother-daughter pair lived with Lipi's aged and frail widowed mother in a small broken homestead surrounded by her older brothers, their wives, and many sons who lived in sturdy earthen homes. She, her daughter, and her widowed mother ate together, but ate separately from her brothers and their families, who dominated the patrilocal compound.

In Bangla, *sangshar* (family, world, domestic life) does not refer only to the people of a family or household but also to 'the assembly of people and things that "flow with" persons as they move through their lives' (Lamb 2000: 42). Sharing food and eating

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together is a defining feature of a *sangshar*, 'eating food from the same pot', as they entail mutual exchanges of love, words, body contact, and food (Lamb 2000: 69). Eating together thus entails feelings of *maya* (fondness, affection, compassion, attachment), *ador* (affection, caress), and *bhalobhasha* (love) (Lamb 2000). It is through the sharing and exchanging of substances, such as food, material goods, a house's space, breast milk, body particles, and words, that substantial emotional connections of *maya* are created between kin and close companions (Lamb 2000: 45).

The descriptions of *sangshar* (and the bonds of *maya* in which it is embroiled) bring to the fore how kinship is not limited to the constraints of genealogical concerns of sharing blood as a substance of kinship (Schneider 1984). In contrast to how Europeans and Americans view persons as relatively closed, contained, and solid 'individuals' (Schneider 1980), ethnosociologists of India argued already in the 1970s that persons are 'dividuals' who constantly exchange some of themselves with what is in their environment (Marriott 1976). In their study of Hindu Bengalis, Inden and Nicholas (1977: 13, 17-18) suggest that family and kinship ties are created and sustained through sharing and exchanging their bodies by means of acts such as birth, marriage, sharing food, and living together. Indeed, even in the 2010s, male shipyard workers in West Bengal become kin through life-sustaining relations of living, working, eating, and performing religious rituals together (Bear 2013). In many of these accounts, exchanges occur through 'mutual touching' (*choyāchūyi*) that results in a mutual transfer of substantial qualities from one person or thing to the next where people retain the effects of touch (Lamb 2000: 32).

Lamb describes how rural Hindu West Bengalis believe that when a person cooks, for instance, their qualities and bodily substance permeate the cooked food and are therefore absorbed by those who eat it. In sharing food, people also share the substance, nature, and qualities of those who prepare, serve, and partake in it (Lamb 2000: 33). Elsewhere, I discuss the *materiality* of 'dividuals' exchanging and becoming entangled with their environments through food – where *shakti* transmits the unseen in similar ways to the microbiome (Dewan 2021: 113-16). *Shakti* means power and strength. It refers to primordial cosmic energy contained in all life forms. In Amazonia, kinship affinity is a primordial given, a soul that relates all living being, where kinship is a process of humans and animals interchanging soul-matter (Viveiros de Castro 2009: 262). The exchanges of unseen matter that Lamb (2000) discusses at length may perhaps reflect emerging findings in microbiology showing that human beings are complex assemblages of microbial becomings that through our skin, gut, and genomes are entangled with multiple species (Haraway 2017; Kirksey & Helmreich 2010; McFall-Ngai 2017). The exchange of substance through eating together without cutlery in this context may therefore indeed have some sort of bodily, physical effect of kinning that we do not yet fully understand (see Benezra 2021 on 'microbial kinship').

Women who return to their natal homes but 'eat separately' (*alada khaowa*) are no longer sharing food in ways that sustain shared bodily relations with their kin. This may potentially contribute to a process of unkinning from bonds of *maya*. While all Bangladeshi women have legal claims to their natal home, the return of divorced daughters/sisters was seen as a nuisance (Dewan 2021: 146). My married interlocutors, such as Rozina and Lakshmi, frequently complained about their returning sisters-in-law (*nonods*) 'who ate separately'. Divorced interlocutors such as Lipi, Noshima, and Snigdha quietly endured any negative remark thrown their way by their brother's wives, or complained that their brothers did not support their ageing parents. Thus, the

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phenomenon of *alada khaowa* illustrates how Bengalis can stop becoming each other's kin when affective ties, emotional connections of *ador*, *maya*, *jatno* (care), and *koshto* (effort) run dry. It is thus different from kinning as a process to create a permanent relation (Howell 2003) or 'dekinning' when one actively renunciates kinship by refusing inheritance (Lien 2023). Through such lack of affect, *nonods* and their children are not only excluded from 'eating together' but they also fail to receive support from their brothers and their wives to stay on better homestead land, or to receive support for educational or healthcare expenses when needed (Dewan 2021: 127-48).

Rozina, one of Yasmine's married colleagues in the Lonanodi LCS group, said while we ate lunch by a canal after their work: 'Some women think it is better to die by their husband's hands than suffering the shame of returning to their natal homes as divorced women. Others feel that it is better to return to their natal home than to die at the hands of their husband'. Elsewhere I have written in detail about how women considered to be 'divorced' or 'abandoned' actually chose to leave their husbands due to inabilities to meet their husbands' or in-laws' continual dowry demands and the excessive domestic abuse that came with these (Dewan 2021). Changing macroeconomics, such as neoliberal reforms like structural adjustment policies, reshape wider structures of marriage and family (Osella 2012). This has increased the need for kinship as a form of social security and emotional extraction for economic ends and highlighted the 'dark side of kinship' (Andrikopoulos 2022; Andrikopoulos & Duyvendak 2020; Cohen 2018; Geschiere 2003).

In Bangladesh, the poster child of microcredit, the focus on 'empowering women to lift their families out of poverty' in the development agenda since the 1990s (Chant 2003; Cornwall 2015) has resulted in women being targeted for development interventions and microloans for small businesses (Karim 2011). This has happened in a context of structural male un(der)employment coupled with land fragmentation resulting from a growing population (Dewan 2021). The dark side of kinship here is that the Bengali custom of doting on the son-in-law (*jamai*) is increasingly being conflated with expectations of continual 'gifts' from the wife's natal family to help the *jamai* secure an income source or to gain social status through material consumption. This is often connected to 'marriage as a business' and women returning to their natal homes (Dewan 2021; Huda 2006). However, such 'unkinning' from patrilineal kinship networks does not in itself mean that these single mothers are completely isolated and without affective bonds sustained from 'eating together', as I will explain next.

Matrifocal 'eating together' and changing filial duties

Moushumi works in the Dhanmarti LCS group and lives with her aged parents and daughter. She had previously worked in the Dhaka ready-made garments sector and only returned to her natal home after her husband abandoned her and their infant daughter. (Her husband wanted a boy.) She resented that her only brother decided to live with his new wife and in-laws as a *ghar jamai* without remitting to their parents. Moushumi took on her brother's filial duty and supported her parents through earthwork and tailoring, relying on her mother and daughter to take over reproductive tasks at home. In light of these changes, the returning daughter can be a solution to a son unable, or unwilling, to support his parents. Since reproductive care work in rural Bangladesh is done by women, filial duty and virilocality translates into relying on the son's wife for elderly care – a relationship that may lack *maya*, *ador*, *jatno*, and *koshto*. As the nuclearization of the family continues in a society without universal social welfare,

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the son and his wife may not support the elderly (widowed) mother as expected by societal norms, but the daughter might.

These changing dynamics also result in widowed women not being completely certain they will be 'eating together' with their sons and daughters-in-law (*bou*). Indeed, women in Nodi often said that perhaps their daughters and sons-in-law (*jamai*) would be more likely to care for them as they age. A woman with four daughters and no son reflected on the fickleness of *bous* (daughters-in-laws): 'Nowadays, a daughter and *jamai* is just as good as a son'. Another woman, with sour relations with her daughter-in-law, stated: 'I have always thought having a son is better, that it secures the future. Now I realize that I can always trust my daughter to take care of me, whatever happens, much more so than I would my son or *bou*'. Although patrilocal virilocal residence was undoubtedly the most common form of household configuration among the four hundred households I surveyed in Nodi, a parallel system of matrifocal residence consisting of multi-generational single-mother family configuration exists alongside it. Among the single mothers I met during fieldwork, they often lived in proximity to their brothers, with their children in proximity to their maternal uncles.

One of my closest interlocutors is Salma, a woman in her mid-twenties who worked on the earthwork project in Dhanmarti. She lives in the lush homestead compound of her maternal grandparents with her mother, daughter, her maternal uncles, and their families – her own father left them at an early age. This means that Salma's 4-year old daughter is now growing up in her *nanir bari* (maternal grandmother's home) as a result of several generations of single mothers living together. For Salma herself, by growing up in her *nanarbari* (maternal grand*father*'s home), she received the support of her grandfather and maternal uncles as her 'male guardians'.

In South Asia, mothers are often seen as strong and loyal allies in difficult times, in sympathy with their daughters' problems (Grover 2009). The mother-daughter bond forms part of important natal kin support structures, but the above also shows the importance of male matrilineal relatives: the maternal grandfather, maternal uncles, and – as in the case of Yasmine – younger brothers who adore their big sister. Thus, rather than an 'individual' female-headed household, landless divorced single mothers in Nodi are surrounded by multiple forms of affective and multigenerational bonds with matrilineal natal kin despite potential adverse relations with brothers and their wives. They can also co-create new kin through friendship or romantic relations via 'second marriages'.

Temporary marriages and seasonal migration to brick kilns

Of all of my interlocutors, Lipi was the one who was most worried about the rural road maintenance project ending. She was especially concerned over her inability to afford her daughter's continued education since schooling is exceedingly expensive for those with meagre and irregular incomes:

> My daughter is so smart and does well in school, but how am I to pay for her tuition and guidebooks? They are so expensive! I don't want to take her out of school, but I'm barely making ends meet by washing dishes and clothes in other people's homes. They give us food [rather than cash]. I don't know how long I'll be able to keep my daughter in school.

Through my household survey, I knew that seasonal labour migration to brick kilns was popular among men as well as women in Nodi.[7] I therefore asked Lipi if she might consider migrating to the brick kilns after the project ends. She replied:

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> I have never migrated, I'm too afraid to go to an unknown place as a lone woman, *kharap* [bad, spoiled, sullied, impure, sexual] things can happen to me. I will never do it! What if someone kidnaps me or if I get lost and cannot find my way back again? It's too terrifying, I won't do that, I'd rather die poor, at home.

Lipi expresses here how she did not see migration as an option. This was further accentuated by the fact that she did not want to leave her adolescent daughter behind since her elderly mother would be unable to take care and cook for her. Furthermore, Lipi did not seem to have any sense of *ador* or *maya* with her brothers' wives to entrust them with her (beautiful) daughter. Lastly, to my knowledge, Lipi never dated anyone and expresses here fear for her safety if she would migrate to the brick kilns without a male companion. Women who enter new spaces or leave home to work without a formal 'male guardian' are often perceived as *kharap* as they break social conventions of women's purity. Several of my interlocutors, including Lipi, described this fear of being perceived as *kharap* by their *samaj* as a reason for why they would not leave Nodi for work. Ultimately, Lipi struggled to find work in Lonanodi such as a domestic maid (catching prawn fry only provides an irregular and low income)[8] and was unable to afford her daughter's continued educational costs.

Approaching these kin relations as affective assemblages thus helps to highlight issues related to concerns over social reputation as well as the exertion of romantic agency. Yasmine felt safe to migrate through her informal romantic partner. The practice of temporary marriages in the migratory brick kilns that Yasmine and her *bariwallah* were engaging in was not unusual. Similar to how migration to brick kilns may be romantically motivated in India (Shah 2006), the privacy of remote brick kilns in Bangladesh provides the opportunity for an alternative life. Each year for the past ten years, Akram from Dhanmarti left his wife and children behind to work in the brick kilns with his childhood sweetheart Poppy (see Fig. 2). He pretended to be her husband for half of the year in the brick kilns, but treated her as a complete stranger once they were back in the village they both lived in.

Despite both being landless single mothers of adolescent daughters 'eating separately' after returning to their natal homes in a barren saline village, Yasmine was able to migrate to the brick kilns and Lipi was not. Their differential abilities highlight the importance of affective assemblages of kinship in shaping migration choices. Yasmine had close, trust-filled relations with matrifocal kin and younger brothers' wives in raising her daughter while she was away and had a romantic partner to live with at the migration site. Lipi, on the other hand, as the younger sister living among older brothers, was concerned with their family's social reputation and did not want anyone to deem her as *kharap* and therefore did not consider migration as a viable option.

During one of my last meetings with the Dhanmarti earthworking group, Megha and Rifa sat by themselves. The two women had not been present several times before this and their colleagues suggested that they could afford to miss work due to 'other income sources': 'Is it possible to get so many gifts from men, like Rifa does, without giving anything back to them?', Salma and Moushumi asked me. Women who themselves secretly had 'boyfriends' or 'husbands' were quick to distance themselves from other women's romantic choices that had become public knowledge. Rifa's boyfriend brought food and gifts for her and her family, while Megha's boyfriend took her out for nice meals and lent her money when she was in need. She brought him to her friends for dinner and introduced him as their *dulla-bhai* (brother-in-law). In both cases, these extra-marital hidden romances that had become public were repudiated as bordering

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Figure 2. Brick kiln in Khulna district. (Photo: Camelia Dewan, May 2015.)

on prostitution and risked their own and their families' social reputation and standing in the *samaj*.

However, these informal intimate relations that Yasmine, Salma, Megha, Rifa, and Moushumi were engaging in expressed how they were reclaiming romantic and sexual agency they did not have in their first (forced child) marriage and ensuing dowry-related domestic violence. This situation is thus in stark contrast to studies that focus on 'love' versus 'arranged' first marriages among adult women (Donner 2002; Grover 2009; Parry 2001). Furthermore, since these relationships were emotionally important to the women, they actively defied patriarchal moral frameworks to make their own romantic attachments. Rather than assuming economic motivations and pragmatism driving migration, paying attention to how affective assemblages shape migration decisions helps us to understand the emotions and individual agency underlying such choices.

Full-time migration to the Dhaka ready-made garments industry

At the age of 16 and having completed Class 10, Salma went with a *khala-to-bon* (cousin via maternal aunt) to work in the Dhaka ready-made garments (RMG) industry.[9] Indeed, like Salma, several of my interlocutors in Nodi had once worked in Dhaka's RMG industry. Working in the RMG sector holds a higher status compared to seasonal

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migration to brick kilns as it is an employment (*chakri*) that provides full-time work throughout the year with higher and regular wages. This is particularly attractive to people in rural Nodi, a place that suffers from high underemployment limited to manual day-labour and agricultural work paid by workload/day (*kaj*). Furthermore, despite its exploitative nature, migrants express agency that they can *choose* to earn more by working paid overtime in garment factories.

Employers of Dhaka RMG factories prefer younger and unmarried women because they are perceived as easier to control and averse to joining trade unions – poor women account for nearly two-thirds of the total employment in this industry (R.I. Rahman & Islam 2013: 7). Undoubtedly, the RMG sector is an example of the race-to-the-bottom of global capitalism by the way it exploits poor women in the Global South (Elson 1994; Sultana 2016), and this has not changed much since the 2013 Rana Plaza accident or the COVID-19 pandemic (Prentice & Neve 2017; Siddiqi 2022). Nevertheless, Bangladesh's garments industry employs more than 4 million people, accounting for 80 per cent of the country's exports (Gardner & Lewis 2015: 177). Indeed, it has remained one of the most popular migration destinations in Bangladesh since the 1980s (Lewis 2011).

The fact that the Dhaka RMG sector only employs workers above the age of 18 with a secondary school certificate incentivized rural villagers in Nodi to allow their daughters to complete their secondary education. In some cases, this has resulted in girls not being married off at age 12, when they are in Class 5. Many of the families in Nodi with daughters who were unmarried, divorced, or without a father wanted to send their daughters to Dhaka's RMG industry to earn money for their dowry and/or to support themselves and their families, similar to other places in Bangladesh (Rozario 2007). Salma went there to save up money for her own dowry, but she emphasized that she travelled with a female relative and lived with a family with strict controls, distancing herself from migrants at girls' hostels:

> When you have six to seven girls living together in a mess [hostel], they can go wherever they want. They have too much freedom; they can go to parks and live like bachelors. No one asks what they are doing. They can stay out late at night, meet boys. There are various problems with these things; they can have [extra-marital] affairs.

Having their own pay and living on their own in anonymous flats, so different from the closely monitored homesteads consisting of kinship networks and a policing *samaj* (the local moral community), the young women could live their lives as they saw fit. This gave them the opportunity to engage in romantic liaisons with men during their time in Dhaka. This freedom to exert their own agency was perceived negatively by Salma, who stated that these girls were *kharap*.

Nevertheless, Salma herself had fallen in love with a young man while working in the RMG sector and married him in the city without their kin. Once she became pregnant, they went to his rural village to live with his family. His parents, however, did not acknowledge the marriage. The couple and their child therefore moved to Dhanmarti to stay with Salma's mother, maternal grandparents, and uncles. Her new husband refused to work as a day-labourer and asked Salma's mother, a divorced single mother, to provide the money for him to start a business. Salma's mother, Jhorna, was unable to meet his demands. One day, when Salma's daughter was only 1 year old, he left. The last time I saw Salma, she revealed that she had fallen in love with a neighbour and that they planned to migrate to Dhaka after the end of the project, where they could live together far away from his wife and children in the village.

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Like Yasmine, Salma kept her partner secret and he played an important role in her decision to migrate to Dhaka after the end of the project. Also like Yasmine, she intended to leave her daughter at home with an elderly female relative, the wife of her maternal uncle (whom she was emotionally close to and trusted), as her mother, Jhorna, was working as a domestic maid in Oman. The work these grandparents do (often an elderly woman relative such as a maternal grandmother, aunt, or sister) is kin work through cooking, feeding, and caring for these children. Ageing grandparents do not simply stop with their *jatna* and *koshto* for adult children, but continue pouring these gifts of love (*ador*, *maya*, *bhalobasha*) onto their grandchildren; indeed, ageing grandparents are important for social reproduction in South Asia, though this is often not recognized (Vera-Sanso 2014).

While global capitalism's search for cheap labour may explain the demand for migrants, it does not sufficiently explain why migrants choose these destinations. Given the prevalence of microcredit debt in Nodi, Dhaka's RMG sector constitutes an extremely important source of labour for working-class rural women. During my survey in Dhanmarti and Lonanodi unions, I found that repaying debt – taken via several microcredit NGOs – was also a major driver for outmigration to Dhaka's RMG sector. This was particularly the case when loans for business, or to migrate abroad for domestic work, failed. Dhaka's RMG sector was easier and cheaper to get work in than migrating abroad. It provided a regular income to send remittances used to repay weekly microcredit debt. For example, earthworking Lakshmi's elderly neighbours were taking care of their grandson Sunil, as their daughter and her husband migrated to Dhaka RMG to pay off a microcredit loan for a failed poultry business. Like Yasmine and Salma, Sunil's parents would not have been able to migrate without the reproductive support of his maternal grandmother. This highlights the importance of supportive kinship relations, particularly between mother, daughter, and maternal grandchild, to enable a single mother's (labour) migration in the first place.

Risking the Gulf: concerns of social reputation

Sahira was a youthful and attractive divorced single mother living in her brother's homestead compound in Lonanodi village who had recently married off both her adolescent daughters. While we were sitting and having a break together, I asked the Lonanodi LCS group what they planned to do now that their project contract was coming to an end. Sahira said that she was considering an offer from her cousin's friend in Dhaka to help her get a job in Saudi Arabia: 'I only have to pay 30,000 taka for a two-year contract. They will arrange the rest. I can manage to get that money and it would be a good way to work after the project ends'.

Bangladeshis have long been migrating to the Middle East and Southeast Asia as domestic workers (Gardner 1995; Siddiqui 2001), while remittances overall contribute greatly to Bangladesh's national economy (around 15 million USD in 2013). Various initiatives headed by governments and international organizations seek to ensure the rights of Bangladeshi workers abroad (Abrar, Rajan, Ruhunage & Siddiqui 2014), and an increasing number of state schemes recruit women to work abroad as a response to the high demand for Bangladeshi women as domestic maids in the Middle East (Migrant Rights 2016).

Prior to my fieldwork, I mistakenly assumed that landless day-labouring women would not have the financial resources necessary to migrate internationally as domestic workers. Instead, I found that rural, low-income women were able to travel by taking

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loans via migration brokers – but with significant risks. Throughout my fieldsite, there were concerns about Bangladeshi women migrants being forced into prostitution or being raped and sexually abused while working as domestic workers in the Middle East. For instance, Sahira's colleagues were sceptical about her interest in going to Saudia Arabia for work. They pointed out that she did not know the *dallal* (broker) and questioned why he would help her without gaining anything (i.e. alluding to *kharap kaj* [sex work]; see also Mehta 2018). Afrina, the oldest, was the most critical:

> We do not want to send our *meye* [daughters, girls] to Arab countries. The brokers only want young and beautiful girls. We have read in the papers that these returned girls were tortured [sexually abused]. Did you know that one of our ministers said that since Bangladeshi girls are being exploited in Bangladesh anyway, they might as well be exploited in Saudi and earn good money?

Afrina's comment illustrates both a concern for safety and an assumption that *kharap* things will happen to women migrating to the Gulf. Similar dynamics were seen in Dhanmarti, where several women had already migrated to Oman via a locally based labour broker. The mother to one migrant woman shared with me that 'I don't really know what she does', while the wife of a farmer, Milou, returned abruptly to Bangladesh and the rumours ranged from her stealing gold to being sexually assaulted and not wanting to remain.

A local broker approached Salma and offered her a two-year work contract in Oman. Salma knew of three families receiving remittances who were doing well and considered it. She pointed out that were her grandfather to pass away, her maternal uncles and their wives might not allow them to stay, despite their current good relations. Therefore, she explained, she and her mother had to save money to buy their own homestead land. However, Salma's 45-year-old divorced single mother, Jhorna, wanted to go to Oman in her place. Grounded in the concerns voiced by Afrina above, Jhorna worried about the (sexual) risks and Salma's safety and said that her daughter was too young and beautiful to migrate by herself to Oman. The broker agreed to send Jhorna instead and said the fee would be 30,000 taka. This was a decision that Salma soon regretted:

> Once we started the process of training, tickets and applying for passports, the cost went up to 50,000 taka. We spent 80,000 taka in total. We feel cheated. We borrowed 60,000 taka and I used 20,000 taka of my own savings. Now my mother is crying daily. They're making her work in two homes rather than just one.

The real costs far exceeded what they had imagined. Furthermore, Jhorna did not speak her employer's language and had to withstand both mental and physical abuse. She struggled for the first few months after she had left her family and country, all for the first time in her mid-forties. Salma pleaded with Jhorna to stay another six months so that they could at least repay the loans they had taken to migrate. If Jhorna broke her contract and returned earlier, the journey to Oman would have been for nothing: they would not have acquired the savings needed to buy land and would be forced to migrate elsewhere to repay their loans. Jhorna's work was thus quite different from ideas of the 'love and care' of transnational maids (Hochschild 2003) and illustrates the vulnerability of international migrants on short-term contracts (Smith 2019).

Moreover, the global literature on women's migration from the Global South highlights an ambiguous division between maids, nannies, and sex workers (Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2004). Domestic workers in the Middle East are seen as having a highly suspect sexual status and are almost always perceived to be sexually immoral (Rozario 1998). Fellow villagers perceive women who work in relatively high-income

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destinations, such as Dhaka's RMG sector or the Middle East, as engaging in illicit conduct contrary to the ideas of their (bounded) sexuality. This type of normative stigma is often an effective tool in stifling women's movement, as also illustrated by Lipi's reluctance to migrate to the brick kilns. Arguably, concerns of sexual exploitation and victimization of women migrant workers can easily be co-opted where negative representations of women's sexuality as *kharap* collude with patriarchal framings that support the policing of women. The desiring woman becomes transgressive: her sexual agency makes her a potentially disruptive threat to the containment of women and to family structures built on meeting the desires of men (Bakare-Yusuf 2013).

In a socioeconomic environment where women are judged within a moral framework that casts their successes and increased opportunities in a negative light, a rural, working-class woman who chooses to take up paid work – or marry of her own choice – is exercising a strategic form of agency in a context where women are stigmatized for doing so (Kabeer 2008: 24). Gendered structures of constraint operate differently throughout the world and we require a 'far more nuanced understanding of [women's] worldviews and the meanings attached to empowerment in societies where women are embedded in highly corporate family structures and relationships compared to those where they enjoy a greater degree of relative autonomy' (Kabeer 2008: 92). Analysing the affective assemblages of kinship among single mothers in a 'climate hotspot' may help us towards these ends.

Rethinking kinship through affective assemblages

Thinking of assemblages of kinship as open-ended gatherings enables us to better understand gendered structures of constraints and to move away from fixed genealogical ideas of patrilineal and virilocal households and the filial duties of male migrants to their patrilocal homes. Shifting our focus to landless single mothers as migrants further nuances anthropological theories of kinship by pointing to how flexible, often ephemeral, relationships become meaningful in allowing people to navigate the expectations and limits of kinship through blood and marriage.

This article has sought to draw attention to the limitations of existing labour migration literature, work on climate refugees, as well as development agencies' fetishization of 'female-headed households'. A significant element supporting migration for women with young children – whether to brick kilns, the Dhaka RMG sector, or even the Middle East – was the presence of an older female relative who could take care of their children in their rural homes. Rather than being isolated only due to 'eating separately' from their brothers, these women who have returned to their natal homes are also embedded in matrifocal kinship relations. These kinship assemblages are built on affect, the emotions of trust, care, and love for grandchildren's well-being, and show the importance of affective relations in shaping women's ability to join the capitalist labour market. There is thus both mobility in terms of how supportive affective kinship assemblages enable single mothers to migrate and move for work, and mobility in kin-work where feelings of *ador*, *jatno*, and *koshto* from 'eating together' may shift towards 'eating separately' when emotions run dry.

Unpacking the migration decisions of landless single mothers further allows us to take into consideration how migration is not always solely economically motivated and that some women use it as an important means to exert emotional and romantic agency. They make new kin through unofficial romantic partners who shape their motivation to migrate to certain sites, while obtaining 'male protection' in what could otherwise

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be risky male-dominated spaces such as brick kilns. Other women may choose not to migrate, or to date, depending on to what extent their concerns for their kinship relations would be harmed if they were found to breach the patriarchal frameworks of the *samaj* that police the purity of women's bodies. Such ethnographic attention sustained through long-term fieldwork grasping everyday lives shows the importance of anthropological insights in broader debates on migration and gender in development, particularly in the Global South.

While mothers (maternal grandmothers) support their daughters to migrate, women who return to their natal homes also support their ageing parents when their brothers and sisters-in-law do not, thus taking up the torch of filial duty. The contradiction of women's roles in the current socioeconomic landscape is intertwined with the changing configurations of males as sons, and resident-sons-in-law. In a global context of precarity, Tsing suggests that 'we are not in control' and that 'we are thrown into shifting assemblages, which remake us as well as our others' (2015: 20). A resident son-in-law may help financially, or he may be taking advantage of the social norm of 'doting' on *jamais* and in the worst case use 'marriage as a business' to the extent that his wife chooses to return to her natal home rather than dying by his hands. Building on Tsing's insights, affective assemblages of kinship are shifting and in flux, where people remake what they believe a family should be. In a context of structural un(der)employment, it is through affective assemblages of kinship as co-created and open-ended becomings of emotional bonds that landless women's migration is either enabled or constrained. To take seriously these affective dimensions of kinship thus enables us to move from passive portrayals of landless women as 'poor climate victims' to active agents in charge of their own lives and livelihoods.

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NOTES

[1] Personal and place names have been changed to protect the anonymity of my interlocutors.

[2] In Bangladesh, households are often determined by whether or not people 'eat together' or 'eat separately'.

[3] Formal legal divorces were quite uncommon here and the Bangla term is *chera daowa* (ছেড়া দাওয়া, to break up, separate, or tear away). In this article, I consider the women who are either abandoned by their husbands or choose to return to their natal home as 'divorced'.

[4] Cooking South Asian dishes is time-consuming and requires much manual labour. Cooking for someone and sharing food is a sign of affection as it is arduous and requires sacrifice of both time and resources.

[5] Matrifocal remittances mainly go to repaying debt, household expenses, healthcare, and schooling costs. In Bangladesh, feeding one's own kin is not seen as labour that requires economic payment, the latter might cause offense to (economically struggling) women since non-transactional reciprocity and gift-giving are preferred. See also Härkönen (2023) on mother-child bonds and Grover (2009) on mother-daughter bonds.

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[6] I carried out all conversations in Bangla and translated them to English myself. I obtained oral informed consent by explaining to each interlocutor the purpose of my work, who I was, what my affiliations were, the nature of my research, that I was not part of a project that they could benefit from, and that all information would be anonymized. I asked open-ended questions about environmental change and livelihood strategies and qualitatively analysed the transcripts of these conversations. I obtained ethics approval for this fieldwork from the Department of Social Anthropology, SOAS (University of London, 2014).

[7] Labour brokers from rural Bangladeshi brick kilns visit Nodi's villages in the lean month of *Kartik* (mid-October to mid-November) to hand out advances to interested labourers – from families with children to single men and women, or same-sex friends and relatives. In order to repay this advance, the migrants work in brick kilns for six months: from *Ogrohayon* (mid-November to mid-December) to Boishakh (mid-April to-mid-May).

[8] Saline prawn-cultivating areas see less agricultural work and income opportunities for women for cottage-based activities (see Dewan 2021). For a detailed analysis of how tiger prawn cultivation shapes migration from such villages, see also Dewan (2023).

[9] The way Salma described this *bon* (sister) made it unclear if they were related 'by blood' or if this was kin made through affect. It does show, however, how migrating with kin endows respectability and avoids labels of being *kharap*.

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Assemblages affectifs de parenté et migration de travail des mères célibataires depuis un « point chaud climatique »

Résumé

Sur la côte du Bangladesh, des « assemblages affectifs de parenté » offrent aux mères célibataires sans terre des possibilités différentes d'émigrer vers les briqueteries, les ateliers d'habillement et les pays du Golfe. Cependant, les anthropologues de la parenté et de la migration ne s'intéressent pas au groupe des femmes qui retournent à leur foyer natal, abandonnées ou fuyant la violence. Concevoir les assemblages de parenté comme des rassemblements ouverts permet d'éviter les constructions généalogiques fixistes de foyers patrilinéaires et virilocaux ainsi que de théoriser les entrées et sorties des personnes d'un assemblage de parenté en fonction des fluctuations dans le temps des liens émotionnels. Les changements rapides

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du paysage socio-économique ont contribué à un désapparentement des sœurs qui reviennent après un mariage raté, à un déplacement des devoirs filiaux et à une résidence matrifocale. Ces femmes « divorcées » créent une nouvelle famille et nouent des relations amoureuses non officielles, choisissant parfois d'émigrer avec leur partenaire pour exercer leur agencéité émotionnelle. La réflexion sur les « assemblages affectifs de parenté » des mères célibataires révèle les complications genrées de la migration de travail rurale, les considérations économiques et affectives/sexuelles/morales, et la dépendance de cette migration d'un soutien social à la reproduction. Cet article offre un correctif ethnographique aux visions réductrices de la migration climatique et de la vulnérabilité des « ménages dont le chef est une femme » et démontre l'importance de l'anthropologie dans la compréhension de phénomènes complexes dans un monde en rapide transformation socio-environnementale.

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