The Journal of Social Development, Vol.34, No.1, December 2025

When Men Can 'Fight' and Women Must 'Manage': A Comparative Analysis of Gendered Survival Strategies among Urban Migrants in Bangladesh

Dr. Bushra Zaman[1]

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Date of Submission: 27-10-2025
Date of Acceptance: 13-04-2026
Date of Publication: 12-05-2026

Keywords:

Female migrants; Male migrants; Gendered precarity; Urban survival; Labour access.

ISSN: 3079-1855
http://doi.org/10.71253/jsd-iswr.dec25.34.1.07

ABSTRACT

While the broad literature on migration documents women's vulnerabilities and men's occupational risks in Bangladesh, relatively few comparative studies have systematically traced how labour markets, housing, and mobility regimes jointly and differentially structure these dimensions of vulnerability and risk. The extant comparative studies, at best, isolate certain sectors or identities and do not engage with how one dimension of vulnerability may connect with another. This paper fills this gap by interrogating the gendered dimensions of survival strategies employed by internal migrants in metropolitan Bangladesh and seeks to understand if urban precarity is a common or a gender-structured experience. Based on comprehensive qualitative interviews among twenty respondents, it conceptualises survival through two patterned orientations, "fight" and "manage", to capture differential configurations of risk, autonomy, and compliance. Using thematic analysis within the frameworks of feminist political economics and intersectionality, this study shows that while men typically maintain higher levels of autonomy and bargaining power, women face much higher risks of exploitation and mobility constraints. Which, coupled with relational responsibilities, further compound the challenges of survival. With parallel narratives of men and women, this paper argues that migration precarity is not an individual phenomenon but a structurally gendered one shaped by gender norms and labour market segmentation. By focusing on mechanisms rather than outcomes, the paper advances migration scholarship and argues for integrated policy approaches addressing labour protection, housing security, and spatial rights.

Introduction

The urbanisation of Dhaka and other metropolitan areas in Bangladesh has been shaped by large-scale internal migration, driven by rural economic stagnation, climate vulnerability, and the expansion of urban labour markets. The latest estimates show that every year, hundreds of thousands move into major metropolitan centres, fuelling rapid growth in informal settlements and the

[1] Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, Jagannath University, 9-10 Chittaranjan Avenue, Dhaka 1100, Bangladesh.Email-bushrazaman@sw.jnu.ac.bd

informal economy (Mumu et al., 2023; Rashid et al., 2023). While this issue has been dealt with extensively in the literature, one significant lacuna remains: while this literature documents the existence of gendered vulnerability, it has not systematically addressed the structural mechanisms underlying these gendered differentiations.

While women's differential exposure to exploitation, limited mobility, and marginalisation within the urban labour market have been well documented, this literature has tended to treat male and female migration as two separate phenomena. Most research on female migrants in Bangladesh focuses on garment workers and domestic servants, highlighting occupational hazards, social isolation, and psychological distress (Islam et al., 2025; Sultana, 2020). Inversely, occupational risks, income insecurity, and informal employment in the construction and transport sectors have been highlighted in studies on male migrants (Marshall & Rahman, 2013; Mills, 2017).

However, these studies offer parallel but conceptually disconnected accounts of male and female migration, lacking a comparative analysis of the role of gender in structuring survival in cities. Beyond mapping the outcomes, little research has examined the mechanisms that create and reproduce these gendered vulnerabilities. While the conditions of urban survival and mobility are well known, the mutually reinforcing relationship between labor market segmentation, housing modalities, and mobility regimes in creating differentially structuring vulnerabilities has rarely been theorized. Hence, disadvantages faced by women are often located within personal experience rather than the product of interlocking institutional and physical mechanisms.

This study intends to overcome such limitations by taking a mechanistic approach to the comparative analysis of gendered migration experiences in a metropolitan setting in Bangladesh. It specifies three dimensions in which the literature can be critically situated. First, despite the wide literature on internal migrants, systematic comparative analyses of men and women under the same structural conditions are missing. Second, mechanisms generating a narrative of gendered inequality remain thinly explained and only offer descriptive data. Third, labour, housing, and mobility are studied separately and rarely related in one coherent framework.

This study analyses the differences in survival strategies and vulnerabilities between male and female migrants in urban Bangladesh through comparative analysis. The study employs qualitative results to conceptualise these behavioural variations as two distinct strategic orientations: men's more outward-facing "fight" tactics and women's more relational and limited "manage" strategies.

Nevertheless, these concepts are neither taken literally nor rigidly but rather treated as analytical categories representing patterned tendencies that emerge from differential access to labour markets, resources, and social power. In this respect, the "fight" orientation would broadly correspond to strategies of survival involving mobility, negotiation, and participation in collective activities within the public space of labour, whereas the "manage" orientation would broadly encompass survival strategies related to the adaptation of interpersonal relations, emotional self-regulation, and acquiescence within employer-dependent, spatially limited domains.

Such differentiation will not imply any rigidity in gender behaviour but will highlight prevailing tendencies inscribed within socially constituted norms against a backdrop of deeply uneven possibilities. Drawing upon in-depth qualitative interviews this article investigates how gender shapes access to jobs and housing, mobility, and coping strategies within the informal and semi-formal urban economy. Theoretically, the research is embedded in feminist political economy and intersectionality perspectives, which problematise the experience of migration within the processes of structuring inequalities and segmentation within the labour market rather than an expression of human agency alone. Hence, survival does not reflect a neutral coping strategy but rather a gendered field of strategic orientation constructed through the different experiences of the public space, labour market, and social capital.

The study illustrates how male and female experiences overlap within similar thematic areas such as employment, housing, safety-related spatial restrictions and emotional labour, showcasing these as interrelated mechanisms that create and perpetuate gendered precarity. The paper moves beyond description towards understanding the differential shaping of risk, autonomy, and recognition regimes by the urban informal systems. It argues migration-related issue is neither just distinguished by gender nor intrinsically gendered: its consequences from institutional, social, and economic conditions, which always distribute women to comparatively dependent positions while conceding men relatively more freedom. Hence, the study aims to perceive frequent patterns that might ascend from inequal opportunity frameworks available for men and women.

Objectives of the Study

1. First, this paper compares male and female internal migrants in urban Bangladesh in a systematic manner to examine how gender shapes survival strategies and vulnerabilities under informal urban precarity.
2. Second, it discusses how gender shapes access to the labour market, housing, and mobility in space and strategies of coping within the informal economy of Dhaka, further unpacking whether the differences

observed in this regard can be linked to individual or structural tendencies.

3. Third, using feminist political economy and intersectionality frameworks, it brings employment, housing, safety, and emotional labour not as separate issues but as intertwined mechanisms that produce distinct vulnerabilities.
4. Finally, this paper empirically shows that the institutional set-up, social norms, and economic hierarchies of urban informal economies reproduce gendered vulnerabilities by unevenly distributing risk, agency, and recognition.

Literature Review: Gendered Migration

Women now account for nearly half of the migrant population, with many concentrated in the informal sector and care economy. Internal and international migration has long been understood as a gendered process in most parts of the world (Donato & Gabaccia, 2015). Given the labour market segmentation pattern in South Asia and most developing countries, women are confined to low-paid and insecure jobs, while men tend to work in more physically demanding but geographically flexible sectors (Kabeer et al., 2013).

Women were historically considered to be dependent on male migrants, exceptional cases, or requiring separate study. Donato and Gabaccia (2015) noted that the literature has so far centred on men as migrants. This gender-neutral perspective was unable to explain different opportunities and constraints faced by men and women in migration processes, which result from the different labour market institutions, social norms, and state policies. Recent studies have challenged this view by considering migration not only as an economic choice but also as a gendered process embedded in relations of power, inequalities, and social reproduction (Werner et al., 2017).

Within this conceptual framework, migration occurs within a capitalist system that devalues reproductive and care labour and exploits gendered inequalities to maintain a pool of cheap and flexible labour (Stevano et al., 2021). Under this view, women's concentration in low-paid garment and domestic work is the outcome of a segmented labour market in which economic agents seek to maximise profit through minimising labour costs (Kabeer et al., 2013). Intersectionality theory provides insight into how gender, together with class, age, ethnicity, and marital status, produces differential patterns of vulnerability (Crenshaw, 2018). It is precisely these interlocking differences in access to the labour market, housing security, and risk of exploitation that render the experience uneven within the category of gender (Amelina & Lutz, 2020).

Female Migration in Bangladesh

Bangladesh experiences high rural-urban migration, especially to Dhaka and Gazipur, driven mainly by economic imperatives, climate-induced displacement, and industrial employment (Mumu et al., 2023). Female internal migration has increased due to employment opportunities in the ready-made garment and domestic work sectors (Rahman, 2025). Bangladesh's ready-made garment sector is the second largest employer after agriculture. The sector employs approximately 4.2 million workers, 59 percent of whom are female. Female garment workers migrate to urban areas, seeking higher wages and economic independence. However, the garment factories exploit them through long working hours, low wages, poor living accommodations, sexual harassment at work, and minimal legal protection (Shewly et al., 2024).

Although domestic work is a significant area for female migrants, still it is invisible and insecure. Studies disclose, over 10.5 million people are domestic workers in Bangladesh, approximately 90% women (The Daily Star, 2025). These workers are out of the coverage of the Labour Act of Bangladesh and are thus vulnerable to all kinds of exploitation without effective remedies against it (Sultana, 2020). Studies reveal, female workers face sexual harassment, physical violence, and restrictions on movement and are under observed by employers, which traps them inside the household and makes violence invisible (Sifullah et al., 2023). Domestic workers in Bangladesh experience what Wu et al. (2024) call "invisible work": they are often unseen, live in employer-provided housing, and must accept emotional labour to keep their jobs.

Male Migration in Bangladesh

Male migrant population accounts for a significant part of Bangladesh's rural-urban migration, but their experience remains under-theorised within migration studies. Existing evidence recommends that men dominate in construction industry, transportation, and other physically demanding informal sectors (Marshall & Rahman, 2013). The construction industry, concerning informal networks of recruitment and layers of delegating, exposes workers to wage theft, insecure income, and high rates of occupational injuries and deaths (Mills, 2017; Tiwary & Gangopadhyay, 2011). Within such situations, men in competitive, physically demanding labour markets, where financial security depends on constant negotiations, movement, and risk-taking.

Male workers are mostly employed in public spaces, including building sites, transportation hubs, and markets, interacting with co-workers, contractors, and agents; conversely domestic workers work within private households. Spatial visibility may scope for informal solidarity and collective negotiation; however, workers also face exploitation (Carré et al., 2020; Chris, 2020).

From a gender perspective, such jobs constitute survival strategies in the external domain because men's survival depends on wage bargaining, endurance, occupational flexibility, and competition in the labor market. Men's livelihoods tend to rely on negotiations over wages, endurance, occupational flexibility, and competitive labour markets. However, survival strategies do not challenge precarity but instead displace it, inclosing vulnerability around physical hazards, wage insecurity, and labour market struggle. Most studies on migration within Bangladesh focus on female migration, with few explicitly comparative between the experiences of male and female migrants. Most studies focus on survival strategies, vulnerabilities, and coping mechanisms of male and female workers in urban sphere, lacking comparative analyses on gender differences in these aspects (Kabeer, 2005).

Workplace exploitation, housing uncertainty, mobility limitations, and emotional labour are considered as distinct experiences rather than interrelated and mutually constitutive. Consequently, this compartmentalised approach challenges theoretical progress, considering these layers of precarity as interconnected through a comprehensive logic of gendered labour market segmentation. Detaching these layers leads to policies that address indicators rather than ultimate structural causes.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs feminist political economy and intersectionality as analytical frameworks to investigate the systemic gendering of survival in urban Bangladesh. It begins with the position that under capitalism, productive labour and social reproduction, broadly defined as current and intergenerational work to sustain labour power are deeply intertwined and hierarchically organised (Bhattacharya, 2017). Social reproduction includes biological reproduction, caregiving, emotional labour, and the maintenance of social networks that enable workers to return to paid labour daily (Stevano et al., 2021).

This emphasis reverses the more usual emphasis on the work migrant women do and places the study's central concern on the reproductive labour that makes that work possible and sustainable. This includes, emotional management that domestic workers perform to please their employers, the negotiations over childcare that garment workers must undertake when their children remain in the villages, and the social and spatial strategies that migrants deploy to survive urban insecurity.

From the perspective of migration, a social reproduction approach allows us to understand women’s large numbers in domestic and care work as indicating the entry of reproductive labour into the commodity form. However, this labour is reproduced within a structure of low value and devaluation (Kofman, 2012).

Women who migrate as domestic workers perform reproductive labour for urban middle-class households, while their own reproductive needs and households of origin frequently remain unmet or are transferred to other women (Ferguson & McNally, 2015). This paper contributes to the elaboration of social reproduction theory in terms of migrant domestic work by showing how forms of labour organisation shape earnings, working hours, and the capacity of migrants to maintain well-being and meet social expectations. It also conceptualises emotional labour as work, for instance, the continual performance of deference, patience, and acquiescence needed to gain access to jobs and housing (Ferguson, 2016). An intersectional approach explains how gender interacts with other axes of social location in producing vulnerabilities to exploitation and impoverishment. Following Rashid et al. (2023), this study considers four intersecting social categories: gender, age, socioeconomic status, and marital status.

Each category has been demonstrated to be structurally significant in shaping Bangladeshi women's migration experience: influencing access to the labour market, mobility, and patterns of vulnerability to exploitation (Rashid et al., 2023). Unmarried young women migrating without the support of kin living in the city are often positioned differently from married women who migrate with family support. Similarly, landless women migrating from rural areas are often different from women from relatively affluent households.

In this respect, this study utilises intersectionality to explore not only inequality between men and women but also the variations within these categories, focusing on the interactive rather than the additive aspects of disadvantage. Thus, this study's explanation of observed patterns focuses on structurally gendered opportunity regimes rather than individualised circumstances, combining an emphasis on social reproduction from feminist political economy with layered inequalities from intersectionality.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative comparative case study methodology to examine the differences in survival strategies and vulnerabilities between male and female internal migrants in urban Bangladesh. Since males and females were matched on various thematic axes of experience, the comparative method ensured the structural trends rather than individual narratives.

Fieldwork was performed from May to July 2025 in Mirpur and the Tongi Industrial Area of Gazipur district. These locations represent contrasting components informal economy: Mirpur, for example, has a large concentration of domestic workers catering to middle-class households, while Gazipur's

industrial belt includes garment factories and construction sites that employ both male and female migrants (Rahman et al., 2021).

The participants included twenty internal migrants (10 from each gender) aged eighteen to forty-five who had lived in the research locations for at least one year and worked as wage labour. To ensure occupation, marital status, and family responsibilities diversity, the sample was drawn theoretically and purposively. The sample included male participants employed in construction, manufacturing labour, and transportation, alongside female participants engaged in domestic work and garment production. The participants were from diversified in socio-economic backgrounds and marital status. Although this sample size might seem small, it fits well with the study's analytical objective of comparing mechanisms rather than determining frequency.

The data were collected through 60-90 minutes long in-depth semi-structured interviews. They were conducted in Bangla and audio-recorded with the participant's consent. Four broad domains, such as employment, housing, social risk, and coping strategies had been covered in the interview guides where male and female questions paralleled each other for more systematic comparison.

A three-stage comparative thematic approach was applied in the analysis. First, an inductive coding of interviews was carried out to find common themes across each gender unit using NVivo. Second, the comparison was made between the men's and women's narratives for each thematic domain to identify points of similarity, divergence, and gendered accuracies. Third, the emerging patterns were linked back through analytical memos to feminist political economy and intersectionality theories, attending to how segmented labour markets, housing dependency, spatial control, and emotional labour commands act to unfold different yet overlapping dimensions of vulnerability.

All the names used in the article are pseudonyms. Before consenting, the participants were informed about the study's objective, their right to withdraw at any point without any repercussions, and their data's confidentiality.

Findings

The comparative findings indicate that rather than simply being an outcome of gender difference, survival in the city is produced by gendered mechanisms operating at different but interconnected levels. In this way, the conceptual framing that guided the analysis brought together three interrelated levels of the labour market segmentation and gendered trajectories of employment, the spatially produced constraints concerning housing and safety, and emotional labour and relational strategies of coping. These analyses have led to the conclusion that migration, even at its most basic, is a structurally gendered

process: across all three domains and in a manner that they mutually reproduce, the choices of women are more limited by material conditions, social expectations, and institutional arrangements than those available to men.

Segmentation of the Labour Market and Gendered Employment Pathways

Rather than separate and individual differences in the capacities of men and women migrants, the urban labour market reveals distinctly different opportunity structures for them and clear occupational segregation. Most men work in construction, transportation, and manufacturing-related activities involving a certain physical element. The most accessible, least regulated jobs are sometimes accessible to bargaining, as collective forms are permitted. Most women work in domestic services and garment factories, two sets of jobs that are ignored and denigrated and regulated through an employer-based dependence.

A construction labourer in Tongi, expressed his negotiating stance:

> "I can change jobs if the work is unsatisfactory or the compensation is inadequate. I work hard, but I know I can support myself. We occasionally negotiate extra days or overtime with contractor, but it is possible" (Rafiq, age: 29).

"I can change" seems to place mobility as a right that does not promise better conditions but rather the most basic right to autonomy in the face of adversity. In "we occasionally negotiate with the contractor", collective action is conceptualised as possible but informal and episodic. A domestic worker in Mirpur articulated divergent limitations:

> "If I decline a household or request higher pay, they can easily dismiss me. I have no option for complaints. I must tolerate because my family depends on my income, and I have little options" (Shila, age: 32).

The statement "I have no options for complaints" thus signals a total lack of institutional regulation of domestic work and, more generally, of systematic exclusion that, by reproducing conditions of vulnerability, constructs this occupational category. While Rafiq "fights", Shila has to "manage";a term implying accommodation rather than resistance.

Sectoral differences cannot explain it, as both construction and domestic work are informal and precarious in their nature. This is made feasible by the social organisation of work and the gendered principles. Construction works through subcontracting chains, and workers maintain their collective identity and can put pressure on the employer through the group. Domestic work isolates workers in the private sphere, making visibility and social solidarity impossible. This spatial dimension is the basis of domestic work's high level of exploitability: spatial invisibility means that any violence is unseen, while organisation against

violence cannot be achieved. Feminist political economy interprets the concentration of women in domestic work as a social devaluation of reproductive activities. Women working in domestic services cook, clean, and care for others, thereby allowing middle-class urban households to enter formal employment. Such work is considered inherently feminine and thus does not qualify as professional work that should be regulated and protected against exploitation and abuse (Federici, 2012).

Spatial Limitations: Housing, Mobility, and Safety as Interconnected Regulations

Housing and safety are interconnected spatial regulation that increase the effects of gendered vulnerabilities, especially on women. Most male migrants share rental accommodation with their co-workers, and despite the overcrowded and modest conditions, this allows for some negotiation and mobility. However, female migrants, especially those working as domestic help, usually live in accommodation provided by their employer; thus, the stability of their housing is linked to the continuity of their jobs and remains beyond their control.

Kalam mentioned something that echoes the sentiment of the male migrants:

> "I live with four other men in a rented room. Although it is crowded, we coexist harmoniously. If the rent is excessive, we engage the landlord for adjustments. No one can prevent my relocation if I choose to leave" (Kalam, age:34).

In this regard, he notes that the conditions allow negotiation, including with the possibility of moving out. Such capacities, even when used minimally, offer functions that can be used as leverage. The situation is entirely different, and in this regard, a domestic worker from Mirpur mentioned conditions like most female migrants:

> "The family I serve provides me with a small room in their home. I cannot move freely. If I face any problem and request to change the room, they scream and react with anger. I do not have ability to rent any place for myself" (Farzana, age:28).

"Provides" means giving, an act of kindness though it is not any obvious contractual right. This is a relationship of debt, which eventually increases dependence. The phrase "I cannot afford to rent any other place for myself" brings out the critical implications of gendered wage disparities and the limited housing options available to single women, which shut off all other possibilities. However, such limitations of spatiality would also be evident in relation to the use of urban transport. One of the respondents observed:

> “Occasionally, there are arguments or thefts at the site, yet we navigate the city with ease. I can use buses or walk home late; it is challenging, but it is my decision” (Quddus, age:37).

His threats are not persistent and do not impinge on his fundamental right to move around the city. This is how most female respondents would also express themselves when asked about spatiality:

> “I am prohibited from going out after 6 pm. The streets are scary, and if I am alone, people look at me and make comments. Even a trip to the shop is difficult.” (Selina, age: 26).

The temporal dimension of 6:00 pm is imposed by society through the mechanism of harassment and moral control. The fact that “people look at me and make comments” testifies to the gendered nature of the public sphere, where the presence of women is always subject to observation and judgement. Here, permission constitutes one of many ways in which employers exercise control outside of the workplace, rendering employees unfree even during their off-duty time.

However, housing-employment relations have evolved primarily as a regulatory mechanism for women. When an employee's housing is supplied by the employer, she cannot ignore the concept of housing security from job security. Under such conditions, the employer’s interest extends all part of employee's life, not only job-related tasks but also moods, expressions, contacts, and even the calendar of her activities. Women were often harassed on public roads. Indeed, feminist scholars argue that this is an example of the process by which urban space is gendered and that only streets, markets, and public transport are assigned to men; women need to explain. Such gendering of urban space also has economic rationales behind it, for it pushes women into housing conditions provided by the employer, where control can be exercised, and resistance is much more difficult.

Emotional Labour and Relational Coping Mechanisms

Alongside material exploitation, women are compelled to provide intense emotional labour. They suppress their feelings while attending to the demands of their employers, family, and the standards of respectable womanhood. While men's strategies focus on moving and negotiating at the community level, women's strategies are more likely to be relational and emotional. Hafiz, a construction labourer, articulated his approach to workplace difficulties:

> “When faced with difficult tasks or an unjust contractor, I consult my colleagues. Collectively, we negotiate improved conditions or, when necessary, move to another site.” (Hafiz, age: 29)

This is a pragmatic and collective approach to handling workplace-related issues: problems are resolved through the solidarity of colleagues or, when necessary, through shifting. Similar stories narrated by other respondents.

A domestic worker named Hena, describes a noticeably different coping mechanism:

> "Whatever happens I must have to smile and assist for everything, even beyond my tasks and capacity. I cannot show unhappiness, I must be patient, otherwise they get upset. Any argument can insecure my salary. I never show my emotions and stay calm" (Hena, Age: 35).

Must have to "smile and be patient" is challenging for emotional security which is critical for labour: managing someone's feelings for others is tough (Tropman & Hochschild, 1984). Hence, Hena has to express false happiness for others which is huge suppression of emotion.

This, too, is invisible and unpaid emotional labour. The job is not limited to "my work" and the contract; it implies lifelong availability. She "cannot argue" about emotional performances and does not "get upset" about them because she would put at risk her money, her wage. Emotional labour intertwines with housing and location rules. Since Hena lives with her employer, her performance of emotion is constant, with no possibility of an offstage moment to take off the mask. This is the other, feminised dimension of precariousness that distinguishes women's from men's: Hafiz can abandon his workplace and adopt several social identities; in contrast, all of Hena's urban life is subsumed under labour.

Interconnected Mechanisms of Gendered Regulation

The three components described above form an interrelated complex system that creates and reproduces gendered precarity. Labour market segmentation channels women into domestic work, which frequently requires employer-provided housing. Employer-dependent accommodation provides a spatial control without the option of finding alternative work. The lack of alternatives, in turn, leads to emotional compliance, and emotional fatigue reduces the energy to resist exploitative working conditions. Thus, these three domains create a self-reinforcing system. Survival, therefore, in this system, for women, is a strategy of managing; it is thus relational and defined by compliance within the parameters of the structure. Shila's e resides with her employer according to the commitment; it limits her freedom. Though she is receiving an accommodation, it has limitations like, movement, hiding emotion and manage to survive etc. which are weak side of labour market.

Although the dimensions of men's experiences of precarity are similar, their operation follows quite different logics. For example, Rafiq's work in the

construction industry allowed him to gain independent accommodation, thereby increasing his urban mobility. This enabled him to change jobs, thus maintaining and expanding his networks among peers. In such conditions, collective power could be generated, further reducing the need for emotional submission. This situates his survival strategy within what can be called the external repertoire of negotiation, mobility, and competitive labour market involvement; a “fight” approach. He is physically and materially precarious: his work exposes him to injuries; he has been a victim of wage theft; and his housing is insecure. However, since his work is performed on the streets, he has a relatively higher chance of organising collectively. These differences do not arise naturally or automatically from the occupational differences but are imbued within the institutional and normative embedding. Indeed, for example, domestic workers are excluded from labour law protection; safe and secure housing outside the employer's control is impossible to access for most women; street harassment is normalised; and, finally, women are socially expected to be deferential. All these factors are intimately linked to why women are located within “manage”-oriented strategies and how men can be “fight”-oriented in their practices. Institutional arrangements thus constitute differentiated regimes of risk, autonomy, and recognition within the informal economy of cities and continue to reproduce gendered precarity through mechanisms of regulation that intersect with each other.

Discussion

What this means is that precarity is gendered at the core by the interplay between labour market segmentation, housing, mobility regimes, and emotional labour demand in the context of urban Bangladesh. These factors render women significantly dependent and limit their autonomy, while granting men a quite greater degree of independence.

The system operates via three interrelated mechanisms. The fragmentation of the labour market forces women into domestic work, where employment is often tied to housing dependency, as employers offer accommodation that workers cannot get independently. This dependence on housing facilitates spatial management, constraining women's mobility through both physical limitations and social oversight. Impaired mobility restricts access to alternate employment options, relegating women to exploitative conditions. Under these circumstances, emotional labour is not merely an option but a fundamental aspect of existence. The three interrelated mechanisms form a feedback loop reinforcing each other and leading to structurally embedded precarity, in which survival depends on continued compliance in the productive, reproductive, and affective domains. The present findings thus contribute to feminist political economics by showing that such vulnerabilities are not “natural” to women but

institutional constructs that reproduce hierarchies within which women find themselves. Earlier studies have argued that women's vulnerabilities are compounded in the informal economy (Akuoko & Amacker, 2025).

However, using a comparative approach, the present study shows how institutional constructs generate hierarchies of gendered vulnerability. It also argues that housing dependency is not an incidental characteristic of domestic work caused by low wages but rather a core feature that facilitates employers' control; spatial constraints serve economic functions by preventing women from developing alternative social networks and livelihood strategies to reduce their exploitation. However, this is very important, as it is where the process of exploitation operates under emotional labour. Research in feminist political economy indicates that emotional and affective labour is central to contemporary social reproduction (Stevano et al., 2021).

Thus, the present study shows that, in Bangladesh's informal economy, emotional work is not a free choice but structurally imperative for the survival of women migrant workers. Female migrants are socially positioned in a way that requires them to work on their feelings, always being patient, grateful, and acquiescent to every demand, not just regarding specific work but in all relationships with employers controlling their housing, income, and movement. This fits with Tropman and Hochschild's (1984) conceptualisation of emotional labour, where emotions are embedded in labour extraction processes. Mezzadri (2023) recently suggested that reproductive labour is directly feeding into the intensification of exploitation within global labour processes at the heart of the contemporary informal economy. This paper extends this line of thought by showing the "how" these mechanisms work. By connecting housing and employment with emotional obedience, employers extract not only labour time but also behavioural and emotional discipline from workers. The absence of spatial separation between home and job eliminates the distinction between productive and reproductive domains, indicating a lack of gender neutrality in the system. The survival modalities described as "manage" for women and "fight" for men reflect structural survival regimes; women's modes entail limited mobility and emotional regulation, while men's modes involve spatial mobility and negotiation opportunities in job markets. These distinctions illustrate that institutional structures allocate risk, freedom, and recognition based on gender rather than behavioral patterns.

Conclusion

Rather than an accumulation of discrete disadvantages, gendered precarity in urban Bangladesh is organised through a system in which segmentation in the labour market, dependence on housing, spatial control, and emotional labour operate as interlocking mechanisms. This paper has argued that migration

inequality cannot be explained solely by the descriptive characteristics of gender difference; rather, institutional and material conditions reproduce different regimes of risk, autonomy, and recognition in the everyday life of the urban informal economy. Comparative analysis shows that three closely related factors are important in explaining survival in the city. First, segmentation in the labour market channels women into domestic service, whereby employment and housing are provided by the employer. Economic survival thus becomes embedded in a process of spatial control. Second, dependence on housing impedes mobility, thus limiting the possibility of finding alternative employment and weakening the construction of social and professional networks. Third, given such impediments to mobility and economic dependence, emotional labour becomes institutionalised as an imperative for survival. All these factors combine to produce what the present study has defined as the “manage” orientation, that is, a survival logic that is compliant and governed by structural constraints. This other modality of precarity is constituted differently and thus gendered.

Employment in construction and other public informal sectors enables spatial mobility and peer networks, allowing wage negotiation and occupational movement even under conditions of instability. For men, this configuration allows for an externally orientated fight logic structured by contestation, mobility, and risk to the body rather than emotional subordination. This is not an essential difference but one that is constituted at the institutional level: labour markets, housing regimes, and social norms inscribe and allow for different configurations of exposure and agency along gender lines. This has significant theoretical implications for migration research, as much of the literature treats gender as a variable conditioning the outcomes of migration. This study argues instead that gender is one of the constituent logics of the structural architecture of urban informality, embedding intersectional differences and inequalities through mechanisms of employment, housing, and mobility, which are not separate domains. Feminist political economy and intersectionality thus allow the analysis to show how structural conditions are played out in everyday survival strategies.

Three directions emerge from this for further research. First, longitudinal research could further understand whether life course trajectories in the city make it possible to move beyond the constraints of "managing" strategies or whether they deepen such dependencies. Second, cross-city comparisons within South Asia could reveal whether these are context-specific processes or more generalised characteristics of informality in the urban space. Third, policy-orientated research could test the assumption that integrated interventions in the systems of work, housing, and mobility are more efficient than isolated interventions in reducing gendered precarity. Therefore, migration inequalities

are not further unpacked as an additional layer of vulnerability but embedded in the structural processes reproducing the conditions for such vulnerability. Hence, changes in the structural relations between labour, housing, mobility, and social norms, rather than their mitigation, are where gendered precarity in urban informal economies can be meaningfully transformed.

Reference

Akuoko, P. B., & Amacker, M. (2025). Informal women's work in public spaces: Why should it matter? *Gender Work and Organization*, *33*(3), 756–767. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.70079

Amelina, A., & Lutz, H. (2018). *Gender and Migration: transnational and intersectional prospects*. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351066303

Bhattacharya, T. (2017). Social reproduction theory. In *Pluto Press eBooks*. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1vz494j

Carré, F., Horn, P., & Bonner, C. (2020). Collective bargaining by informal workers in the global South: where and how it takes place. In *Edward Elgar Publishing eBooks*. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781788972802.00022

Chris, T. (2020). Informal domestic workers, informal construction workers, and the state. In *The Informal Economy Revisited* (pp. 246–250). https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429200724-44

Crenshaw, K. (2018). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics [1989]. In *Feminist Legal Theories* (pp. 57–80). https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429500480-5

Donato, K. M., & Gabaccía, D. R. (2015). *Gender and international migration : from the slavery era to the global age*. http://bvbr.bib-bvb.de:8991/F?func=service&doc_library=BVB01&local_base=BVB01&doc_number=028119278&sequence=000002&line_number=0001&func_code=DB_RECORDS&service_type=MEDIA

Federici, S. (2012). Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, reproduction, and feminist struggle. In *Medical Entomology and Zoology*. http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB11748089

Ferguson, S. (2016). Intersectionality and Social-Reproduction Feminisms. *Historical Materialism*, *24*(2), 38–60. https://doi.org/10.1163/1569206x-12341471

Ferguson, S., & McNally, D. (2015). Precarious Migrants: gender, race and the social reproduction of a global working class. *Socialist Register*, *51*(51). https://socialistregister.com/index.php/srv/article/view/22092

Islam, M. M., Uddin, M. B., & Shetu, M. M. R. (2025). Internal migration impacts on the mental health of Bangladeshi female ready-made garment workers: a phenomenological study. *BMC Public Health*, *25*(1), 1505. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-025-22528-3

Kabeer, N. (2005). Gender equality and women's empowerment: A critical analysis of the third millennium development goal 1. *Gender & Development*, *13*(1), 13–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/13552070512331332273

Kabeer, N., Sudarshan, R., & Milward, K. (2013). Organizing Women Workers in the Informal Economy: Beyond the Weapons of the Weak. *Choice Reviews Online*, *51*(03), 51–63. https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.51-1563

Kofman, E. (2012). Rethinking care through Social Reproduction: Articulating circuits of migration. *Social Politics International Studies in Gender State & Society*, *19*(1), 142–162. https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxr030

Marshall, R., & Rahman, S. (2013). Internal migration in Bangladesh: character, drivers and policy issues. In *undp.org*.

Mezzadri, A. (2023). Social reproduction, labour exploitation and reproductive struggles for a global political economy of work. In *Edward Elgar Publishing eBooks* (pp. 64–73). https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839106583.00012

Mills, S. E. (2017). Fractures and Alliances: labour relations and worker experiences in construction. *Labour / Le Travail*, *80*(1), 13–26. https://doi.org/10.1353/llt.2017.0041

Mumu, S. J., Stanaway, F. F., & Merom, D. (2023). Rural-to-urban migration, socio-economic status, and cardiovascular disease risk factors among Bangladeshi adults: A nationwide population-based survey. *Frontiers in Public Health*, *11*, 860927. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.860927

Rahman, M. S., Rahman, A., Sultana, S., & Nahrin, K. (2019). Informal economic activities in residential areas of Dhaka City: Empirical evidence from Mirpur area. *The Jahangirnagar Review: Part II: Social Sciences*, *XLIII*, 135–152. https://www.bip.org.bd/admin/uploads/member-publication/2021/MP--86fbfb4889.pdf

Rahman, S. (2025). Rural to Urban Migration Factors of Less-Educated Women: Evidence from Female Garment Workers in Bangladesh. *Journal of Rural Development*, 374–386. https://doi.org/10.25175/jrd/2024/v43/i3/173145

Rashid, S. R., Ansar, A., & Khaled, A. F. M. (2022). "The pandemic has added to my miseries": Bangladeshi migrant workers' social protection revisited. *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, *8*(1), 273–290. https://doi.org/10.1177/20578911221141759

Shewly, H. J., Bal, E., & Laila, R. (2024). Hyper-Precarious Lives: Understanding migration, global supply chain, and gender dynamics in Bangladesh. *Social Inclusion*, *12*. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.7784

Sifullah, M. K., Sohel, M. S., Sarker, M. F. H., Islam, M., Ahmad, M., & Rahman, M. M. (2023). Mapping out the vulnerabilities of migrant women in the informal sector: A qualitative investigation in Dhaka city. *Heliyon*, *9*(10), e20950. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e20950

Stevano, S., Mezzadri, A., Lombardozzi, L., & Bargawi, H. (2021). Hidden Abodes in Plain Sight: the Social Reproduction of Households and Labor in the COVID-

19 Pandemic. *Feminist Economics*, *27*(1–2), 271–287. https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2020.1854478

Sultana, H. (2020). Migration, Trafficking, Sex work and Constrained Choices: Gender and Sustainable Development in Bangladesh. In *Sustainable development goals series* (pp. 147–159). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-36494-6_9

The Daily Star. (2025, February 18). Protection and Improvement of Living Standards of Domestic Workers. *The Daily Star*. https://www.thedailystar.net/roundtables/news/protection-and-improvement-living-standards-domestic-workers-3827026

Tiwary, G., & Gangopadhyay, P. (2011). A review on the occupational health and social security of unorganized workers in the construction industry. *Indian Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, *15*(1), 18. https://doi.org/10.4103/0019-5278.83003

Tropman, J. E., & Hochschild, A. R. (1984). The Managed Heart: Commercialization of human feeling. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, *3*(3), 483. https://doi.org/10.2307/3324333

Werner, M., Strauss, K., Parker, B., Orzeck, R., Derickson, K., & Bonds, A. (2016). Feminist political economy in geography: Why now, what is different, and what for? *Geoforum*, *79*, 1–4. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2016.11.013

Wu, J., Kilby, P., Rashid, S. R., & Sarker, N. M. (2023). Patriarchal bargains in short-term women's migration from Bangladesh. *International Migration*, *62*(1), 180–195. https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13209