



Family Cohesion, Counseling Support, and the Reintegration of Returnee Migrant Women in Bangladesh: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

International labor migration has become a major livelihood strategy for women from developing countries, including Bangladesh. However, the reintegration of female return migrants remains a complex process shaped by social stigma, psychological stress, and family dynamics. This study explores how family cohesion and psychosocial counseling support influence the reintegration experiences of returnee migrant women in Bangladesh. Drawing on qualitative data from 25 in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions (each with 8 participants) with returnee migrant women, the study applies Family Systems Theory and the Capability Approach to analyze how family relationships and counseling interventions shape women's agency, well-being, and social participation after migration. The findings reveal that women returning to cohesive families characterized by open communication and flexible roles experience smoother psychological and economic reintegration. In contrast, women in low-cohesion families often face blame, social isolation, and limited economic support. Counseling services play a crucial role in rebuilding confidence, strengthening coping mechanisms, and expanding women's capabilities, particularly for those lacking supportive family environments. The study contributes to migration scholarship by highlighting the interaction between family dynamics and psychosocial support in shaping reintegration outcomes. Policy recommendations emphasize the need for family-centered reintegration programs, community awareness initiatives, and expanded counseling services for returnee migrant women.

Keywords: *Capability approach; Family cohesion; psychosocial counseling; Return migration; Women migrant reintegration*

Introduction

Bangladesh stands as a prominent labor-exporting nation, with millions of its citizens, including a significant number of women, migrating to regions such as the Middle East for employment, particularly in domestic and care sectors (Siddiqui, 2023). Female migrant workers face distinct challenges upon their return, including social stigma, economic instability, and psychological distress, all of which complicate their reintegration into family and community life (Rahman, 2018). Family cohesion, defined as the emotional bonding and mutual support within a family unit (Olson et al., 1983), plays a pivotal role in shaping the

reintegration experiences of these women. Similarly, counseling support serves as a critical intervention to address mental health challenges and facilitate social adjustment (Mucci et al., 2019). Despite their significance, the interplay between family cohesion and counseling support in the context of female return migrants in Bangladesh remains underexplored.

Returnee migrant women frequently encounter social stigma, family tensions, and psychological distress upon returning home (Ullah, 2022). In many cases, migration disrupts established family relationships and gender norms, making reintegration a complex and emotionally demanding process. Research suggests that the attitudes and support of family members play a crucial role in shaping how successfully return migrants reintegrate into their communities (Black & Gent, 2006). Despite growing attention to return migration, relatively little research has examined how family dynamics influence the reintegration experiences of returnee women. Moreover, the role of psychosocial counseling in supporting reintegration remains underexplored in migration studies. This study addresses these gaps by examining how family cohesion and counseling support interact to shape the reintegration trajectories of returnee migrant women in Bangladesh. The study is guided by two primary objectives: (1) to examine how family dynamics, particularly communication patterns and role arrangements, influence the reintegration experiences of returnee migrant women, and (2) to explore how counseling support contributes to the psychological well-being, agency, and social participation of returnee women during the reintegration process.

Rationale of the Study

The reintegration of female return migrants in Bangladesh is fraught with challenges, including social stigma, economic insecurity, and disrupted family ties, particularly for those returning from domestic work in the Middle East and Southeast Asia (IOM, 2020; Siddiqui, 2016). These issues are exacerbated by limited access to mental health and counseling services in urban hubs like Dhaka, where resources are scarce (Nawaz and Tonny, 2019). While research has addressed economic and social reintegration barriers, the interplay between family cohesion—defined as emotional bonding and mutual support—and counseling support remains under examined, especially through a gendered lens (Ahmed et al., 2015; Chy et al., 2023).

Family cohesion is vital for reintegration but is often strained by migration-related stressors, while counseling can alleviate psychological distress and strengthen family ties (Kuschminder, 2014). Yet, the efficacy of such services for female returnees is poorly understood. This study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of female return migrants in Dhaka, focusing on how family cohesion and counseling support intersect to shape reintegration. Grounded in feminist frameworks, it highlights gendered vulnerabilities (Kofman, 2019). By addressing these gaps, the study aims to inform gender-sensitive policies and enhance counseling interventions, contributing to global migration scholarship and supporting female returnees in Bangladesh and beyond.

Research Questions

1. How do family relationships and levels of family cohesion shape the reintegration experiences of returnee migrant women?

2. What role does psychosocial counseling play in supporting the psychological recovery and capability development of returnee women after migration?

Literature Review

Gendered Stigma and Social Reintegration

Returnee migrant women often face social stigma and moral scrutiny in their home communities. Research shows that women who migrate for work may be perceived as having violated traditional gender norms, particularly in patriarchal societies (Chy et al., 2023). Upon return, these women may encounter suspicion, gossip, and social exclusion, which complicate their reintegration process. In Bangladesh, cultural expectations surrounding women's behavior and mobility can intensify stigma against female migrants. Studies have shown that returnee women may be blamed for family problems or judged for their experiences abroad (Nawaz and Tonny, 2019). Such stigmatization can significantly affect women's psychological well-being and limit their social participation.

Migration-Related Trauma and Psychological Vulnerability

Migration experiences can expose women to a range of psychological challenges, including exploitation, isolation, and emotional stress (International Organization for Migration, 2017a). Many female migrants return with experiences of trauma or abuse, which can affect their mental health and confidence. Research suggests that psychological distress can hinder returnees' ability to reintegrate socially and economically (Ruben et al., 2009). Without adequate support systems, returnee women may struggle to rebuild their sense of identity and autonomy after migration.

Family Dynamics and Reintegration

Family relationships play a central role in the reintegration process. According to migration scholars, supportive families can provide emotional encouragement, economic assistance, and social acceptance for returnees (Black & Gent, 2006). Conversely, family conflicts or rigid gender expectations can hinder reintegration. Studies have also highlighted the importance of communication patterns and role flexibility within families. When families adapt to the return of migrant members and allow renegotiation of roles, reintegration tends to be smoother (King & Lulle, 2016).

Counseling and Support Services

Psychosocial counseling has emerged as an important support mechanism for return migrants. Counseling programs help individuals' process migration-related trauma, rebuild confidence, and develop coping strategies (IOM, 2017b). For returnee women, counseling can play a particularly important role in strengthening agency and resilience. However, access to counseling services for migrants in many developing countries remains limited, and research on their effectiveness is still emerging.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Family Systems Theory

Family Systems Theory views the family as an interconnected system in which each member influences the functioning of others (Bowen, 1993). Key concepts such as family boundaries, communication patterns, and role arrangements shape how families respond to changes and stress. In the context of return migration, the return of a migrant member may disrupt established family dynamics. Families characterized by open communication and flexible roles may adapt more easily to such changes, facilitating smoother reintegration.

Capability Approach

The Capability Approach, developed by Sen (1999), focuses on individuals' ability to achieve valued ways of living. Rather than only measuring economic outcomes, this framework emphasizes capabilities such as agency, well-being, mobility, and social participation. Applying this perspective to migration reintegration highlights how support systems—including family and counseling services—can enhance returnees' capabilities and enable them to rebuild their lives after migration.

Conceptual Framework

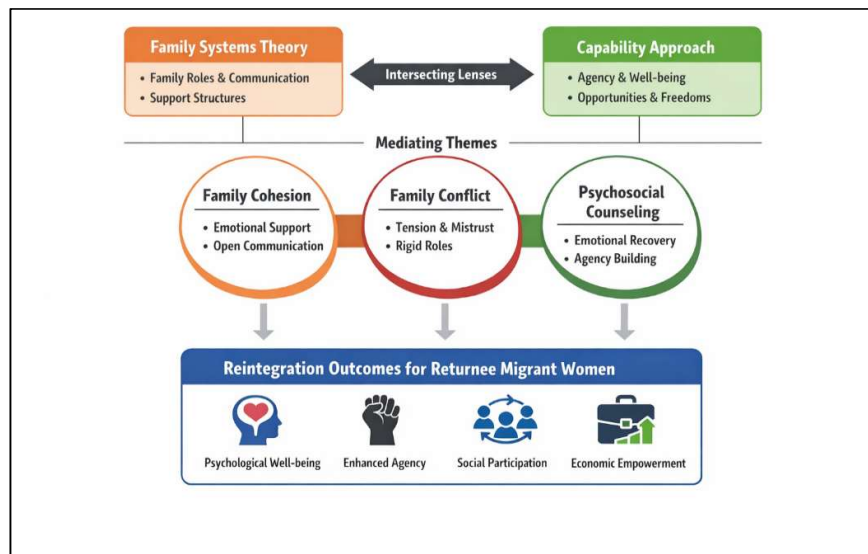


Figure 1. Conceptual framework integrating Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory and Amartya Sen's Capability Approach to explain how family dynamics and psychosocial counseling shape the reintegration outcomes of returnee migrant women.

The framework shows how family cohesion, family conflict, and psychosocial counseling act as mediating factors that influence women's psychological well-being, agency, social participation, and economic empowerment during the reintegration process.

Methodology

Research design, area, and sample size

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically employing a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of female return migrants in Bangladesh concerning family cohesion and counseling support during their reintegration process. The phenomenological approach is suitable for understanding subjective experiences and the meanings individuals ascribe to them, aligning with the study's aim to capture the nuanced interplay between family dynamics and counseling support (Giorgi, 2009). An inductive process is used to allow themes to emerge organically from the data, ensuring a deep understanding of the participants' perspectives (Husserl, 2012). The study was conducted in Narsingdi District, located in the Dhaka Division of Bangladesh, with significant populations of return migrants.

These areas were selected due to their high concentration of returnee communities, access to counseling services, and diverse socio-economic contexts, which provide a rich setting for exploring reintegration dynamics (IOM, 2020). The study employs purposive sampling to select 25 female return migrants who have returned to Bangladesh within the past five years and have engaged with counseling services. A total of 41 returnee migrant women participated in the study, comprising 25 in-depth interview participants and 16 FGD participants. This sample size is consistent with qualitative research recommendations for phenomenological studies, which suggest 10–20 participants to achieve data saturation (Creswell, 2013). Maximum variation sampling is used to ensure diversity in age, migration destination, duration of stay abroad, and socio-economic background, capturing a broad range of experiences (Patton, 2014).

Data collection and instruments

Data are collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility in exploring participants' experiences while maintaining a focus on key topics such as family cohesion, counseling experiences, and reintegration challenges (Kallio et al., 2016). Two FGDs, each with 8 participants, are conducted to capture collective perspectives and group dynamics related to reintegration and family support (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Interviews and FGDs are audio-recorded with participants' consent and conducted in Bengali to ensure comfort and authenticity of responses.

- Interview Guide: The guide includes open-ended questions such as, "Can you describe how your family supported you during your reintegration?" and "How has counseling influenced your relationships with family members?" Probes are used to elicit detailed responses.
- Focus Group Guide: The FGD guide focuses on shared experiences, with questions like, "What role does family cohesion play in the reintegration process for return migrants?" and "How do counseling services address family-related challenges?"

- **Demographic Questionnaire:** A brief questionnaire collects data on age, migration history, education, and socio-economic status to contextualize participants' narratives.

Interviews are conducted in private settings to ensure confidentiality, and FGDs are held in community centers to facilitate open discussion. Field notes are maintained to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations (Liamputtong, 2020).

Data Analysis Procedures, Validity and Reliability

Data analysis follows an inductive content analysis (ICA) approach, suitable for identifying themes from qualitative data without preconceived categories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The process includes: **Transcription and Translation:** Audio recordings are transcribed verbatim in Bengali and translated into English by bilingual researchers, ensuring accuracy and retention of meaning. Transcripts are coded using qualitative data analysis software (e.g., NVivo). Initial open coding identifies key concepts, followed by axial coding to establish relationships between codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Codes are grouped into themes, such as “family support dynamics” or “impact of counseling on reintegration.” A narrative approach is used to weave participants' stories into cohesive findings (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

To ensure credibility (validity), the study employs:

- **Triangulation:** Multiple data sources (interviews, FGDs, field notes) are used to cross-validate findings (Carter, 2014).
- **Member Checking:** Preliminary findings are shared with participants to verify accuracy and resonance with their experiences (Cresswell, 2013).

To ensure reliability, the research process has been meticulously documented, including an audit trail of raw data, coding schemes, and field notes for transparency and replicability (Patton, 2014).

Table 1. Illustrative Participant Quotes Supporting the Emergent Themes

Code	Theme	Illustrative Participant Quote
Emotional Support	Family Cohesion as a Reintegration Pillar	<i>"When I returned home, my mother never blamed me for what had happened abroad. Instead, she encouraged me to start my life again. Her support gave me the confidence to move forward."</i> (Participant P07, Age 34, Returnee from Saudi Arabia)
Family Stigma	Barriers to Reintegration	<i>"Some relatives believed I had failed because I came back without enough savings. Their comments made me feel isolated and reluctant to participate in family gatherings."</i> (Participant P12, Age 29, Returnee from Oman)
Counseling Support	Counseling as a Mechanism for Recovery	<i>"The counseling sessions helped me realize that my experiences did not define my worth. I gradually regained my confidence and started planning for my future."</i> (Participant P19, Age 38, Returnee from Saudi Arabia)

Ethical Statement

Ethical approval was obtained from the Bangladesh Open University Ethics Committee (Approval No.: BOU/RCR-455/2023-2024/2346-1). Informed consent is obtained from all participants through oral and written information provided in Bengali, ensuring comprehension. Participants are informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Anonymity and confidentiality are maintained by assigning pseudonyms and storing data securely on password-protected servers. No identifying information is included in publications. To address potential distress from discussing sensitive topics like migration and family dynamics, referrals to local counseling services are provided. The study respects participants' autonomy and cultural diversity, aligning with ethical guidelines for research with vulnerable populations (Clark-Kazak, 2019).

Findings

The analysis reveals that the reintegration experiences of returnee migrant women are strongly shaped by family dynamics and access to psychosocial counseling. Drawing on the analytical lenses of Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory and Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, the findings highlight how communication patterns, family roles, and support structures influence women's psychological well-being, agency, and social participation during reintegration (Bowen, 1993; Sen, 1999). Three major themes emerged from the data: family cohesion and emotional reintegration, family conflict and constrained capabilities, and the role of counseling in rebuilding agency and resilience.

Family Cohesion and Emotional Reintegration

The findings indicate that women who returned to families characterized by high levels of cohesion experienced smoother emotional and social reintegration. In such families, open communication and supportive relationships allowed returnee women to share their migration experiences without fear of judgment. Participants described how family members actively listened to their experiences and provided emotional reassurance. These interactions helped reduce feelings of isolation and facilitated the rebuilding of trust within the family. Similar observations have been documented in migration research, which emphasizes the importance of family support in shaping reintegration outcomes (Cassarino, 2004; Ruben et al., 2009).

From the perspective of Family Systems Theory, these families demonstrated flexible boundaries and adaptive role arrangements, enabling them to adjust to the return of migrant members (Bowen, 1993). Rather than enforcing rigid expectations, family members often renegotiated household responsibilities and decision-making roles. This supportive environment significantly enhanced women's psychological well-being and confidence, which are key capabilities within the Capability Approach framework (Sen, 1999). Women in cohesive families were more likely to participate in household decisions and explore livelihood opportunities after returning home. Such findings align with studies suggesting that family cohesion enhances social participation and agency among return migrants (De Haas, Fokkema, & Fihri, 2015).

Family Conflict and Constrained Reintegration

In contrast, participants who returned to low-cohesion family environments reported experiencing tension, mistrust, and blame. In several cases, family members questioned the women's moral character or expressed dissatisfaction with the financial outcomes of migration. Such reactions created emotional distress and often discouraged women from openly discussing their migration experiences. Communication patterns in these families were characterized by silence or accusations rather than supportive dialogue. According to Family Systems Theory, these dynamics reflect rigid role expectations and restrictive family boundaries, which limit the family's ability to adapt to change (Bowen, 1993). Women in such environments often felt marginalized within their own households.

From the perspective of the Capability Approach, these conditions constrained women's capabilities in several ways. Limited emotional support reduced their psychological well-being, while restrictions on mobility and decision-making undermined their agency and social participation (Sen, 1999). These findings are consistent with studies on return migration that highlight how social stigma and family conflict can hinder reintegration, particularly for women migrants returning from domestic work in the Middle East (Walsh & Shutes, 2013). Consequently, women from low-cohesion families reported greater difficulty rebuilding their confidence and pursuing economic activities after return.

Counseling as a Mechanism for Psychological Recovery

Psychosocial counseling emerged as a critical mechanism supporting reintegration, particularly for women who lacked strong family support. Participants who accessed counseling services reported improvements in emotional stability, self-confidence, and coping strategies. Counseling sessions provided a safe space for women to discuss traumatic migration experiences, including exploitation, loneliness, and abuse. Through these interactions, women were able to process emotional distress and develop new perspectives on their experiences. Previous research has similarly emphasized the role of psychosocial support in addressing the mental health needs of return migrants (IOM, 2020).

Importantly, counseling also helped women regain a sense of agency. Participants described how counseling encouraged them to set personal goals, rebuild social relationships, and explore income-generating activities. Within the Capability Approach framework, counseling can therefore be understood as an intervention that expands women's capabilities, particularly in terms of psychological well-being, agency, and social engagement (Sen, 1999). Moreover, counseling played two distinct roles depending on the family context. In families with strong cohesion, counseling reinforced existing support systems. In contrast, for women facing family rejection or conflict, counseling functioned as an alternative support structure, compensating for the absence of family support.

Table 2 : Comparative Reintegration Outcomes by Family Cohesion

Dimension	High Family Cohesion	Low Family Cohesion
Communication	Open and supportive dialogue	Silence, suspicion, or blame
Family Roles	Flexible and adaptive	Rigid and hierarchical
Psychological Well-being	Increased confidence and stability	Anxiety and emotional distress
Economic Reintegration	Family provides encouragement and support	Limited or no support
Role of Counseling	Reinforces family support	Acts as substitute support

Note. A comparative analysis of cases with high and low family cohesion highlights significant differences in reintegration outcomes.

This comparison demonstrates that family cohesion significantly influences reintegration trajectories. Women embedded in supportive family systems were better positioned to rebuild their capabilities and pursue livelihood opportunities. In contrast, women in unsupportive family environments relied more heavily on counseling services to navigate reintegration challenges.

Discussion

This study examined how family cohesion and psychosocial counseling shape the reintegration experiences of returnee migrant women in Bangladesh. The findings demonstrate that reintegration is not solely an economic process but a complex social and psychological transition influenced by family relationships and support systems.

Family Cohesion and Reintegration Outcomes

The results highlight the critical role of family cohesion in shaping return migrants' reintegration experiences. Women who returned to supportive families characterized by open communication and flexible role arrangements reported greater emotional stability and confidence. These findings align with the core principles of Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory, which emphasizes that family members function within an interconnected relational system where communication patterns and role flexibility influence the overall functioning of the family.

Families with adaptive structures were better able to accommodate the return of migrant members and renegotiate household roles. Such supportive environments enabled women to regain a sense of belonging and security, which facilitated their emotional and social reintegration. These findings are consistent with previous studies that highlight the importance of family support in migrant reintegration processes (Black & Gent, 2006; Lulle & King, 2016). In contrast, women who returned to families with rigid hierarchies and limited communication experienced greater reintegration challenges. Family members often questioned their migration experiences or blamed them for financial outcomes, which created emotional distress and reduced their willingness to participate in family and community life. These dynamics illustrate how restrictive family environments can hinder reintegration by limiting women's emotional support networks.

Reintegration through the Capability Approach

The findings can also be interpreted through the Amartya Sen Capability Approach, which emphasizes individuals' ability to achieve valued ways of living. Reintegration involves more than economic recovery; it requires the restoration of capabilities such as psychological well-being, agency, and social participation. Women who received emotional support from family members were better able to rebuild these capabilities. Supportive family environments allowed women to participate in household decision-making, rebuild social relationships, and pursue livelihood opportunities. In contrast, limited family support constrained women's capabilities by restricting their mobility, confidence, and participation in economic activities. These findings reinforce existing research suggesting that reintegration outcomes depend not only on structural opportunities but also on social support systems that enable migrants to exercise their agency (Ruben et al., 2009).

The Role of Counseling in Rebuilding Agency

The study also highlights the significant role of psychosocial counseling in facilitating reintegration. Counseling services provided emotional support and coping strategies that helped women process migration-related trauma and rebuild self-confidence. Participants reported that counseling sessions allowed them to openly discuss difficult experiences, which contributed to emotional recovery. Importantly, counseling expanded women's capabilities by strengthening their sense of agency and encouraging active participation in social and economic life. This finding supports research emphasizing the importance of psychosocial support in migrant reintegration programs (IOM, 2020). The role of counseling varied depending on family context. For women embedded in cohesive families, counseling reinforced existing support structures and helped them navigate the emotional challenges of return. However, for women facing family conflict or rejection, counseling functioned as a substitute support system that partially compensated for the absence of family support.

Integrating Family Systems and Capability Perspectives

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that reintegration outcomes are shaped by the interaction between family systems and individual capabilities. Family cohesion provides the relational environment necessary for emotional support and role adaptation, while counseling interventions enhance individual capacities for coping and decision-making. By integrating Family Systems Theory and the Capability Approach, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of reintegration processes. The combined framework illustrates how both relational dynamics and individual empowerment shape the trajectories of returnee migrant women.

Conclusion

This study examined how family cohesion and psychosocial counseling shape the reintegration experiences of returnee migrant women in Bangladesh. The findings demonstrate that reintegration is not solely an economic process but a complex social and psychological transition shaped by family relationships, communication patterns, and access to support services. Women returning to cohesive families characterized by trust, emotional support, and flexible role arrangements experienced smoother psychological and social reintegration. In

contrast, women who returned to families marked by conflict, suspicion, or rigid gender expectations faced greater emotional distress and barriers to rebuilding their livelihoods.

Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to migration and reintegration scholarship by integrating Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory and Amartya Sen's Capability Approach to explain the reintegration experiences of returnee migrant women. While previous research has often focused on economic outcomes of return migration, this study highlights the importance of relational dynamics within families as a key determinant of reintegration. By combining these two theoretical perspectives, the study demonstrates how family interaction patterns shape women's capabilities, particularly their psychological well-being, agency, and social participation. This integrated framework provides a more holistic understanding of reintegration as both a relational and capability-building process.

Policy Contribution

The findings have important implications for migration governance and reintegration programs in Bangladesh and other labor-sending countries. First, reintegration policies should move beyond economic assistance and incorporate family-centered approaches that recognize the role of family dynamics in shaping return outcomes. Second, expanding psychosocial counseling services for returnee migrants is essential, particularly for women who experience stigma or lack family support. Community-based counseling programs, awareness campaigns, and local support networks could help reduce stigma and facilitate smoother reintegration. Finally, government and non-governmental organizations should strengthen livelihood and skill development programs for returnee women to enhance their economic independence and social participation.

Future Research Directions

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that open avenues for future research. First, the qualitative nature of the study and its relatively small sample size limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could employ mixed-methods approaches combining qualitative interviews with large-scale surveys to better understand reintegration patterns. Second, comparative studies across different regions of Bangladesh or across different migrant destination countries could provide deeper insights into how cultural and institutional contexts shape reintegration outcomes. Finally, longitudinal research examining return migrants over time would help identify how family relationships and counseling interventions influence women's capabilities and well-being in the long term. In conclusion, this study highlights that successful reintegration requires both supportive family environments and accessible psychosocial support systems. Strengthening these dimensions can play a critical role in enabling returnee migrant women to rebuild their capabilities, restore their sense of agency, and participate meaningfully in family and community life.

Data availability statement

The data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical considerations.

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