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Exploring the Nexus between Aspirations and Immobility by using Schewel's Aspiration-Capability Framework: A Case Study on Northern Bangladesh

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Abstract

This study investigates the individual, socio-economic, and gender-specific factors contributing to immobility in Rangpur, Bangladesh. Using qualitative research methods, including 32 semi-structured interviews, the study applies Schewel's Aspiration-Capability Framework to analyze the dynamics of mobility and immobility. The findings reveal that immobility in Rangpur is primarily motivated by socio-economic constraints, such as limited financial resources and employment opportunities, as well as deeply rooted gender norms that severely curtail women's mobility. While many aspire to migrate for better opportunities, they often lack the necessary capabilities or resources, leading to involuntary immobility. The study also identifies voluntary immobility, in which individuals choose to remain due to strong community ties, cultural preservation, and personal contentment, and acquiescent immobility, characterized by a lack of both aspiration and capability to migrate. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of immobility in socio-economically disadvantaged regions and offers evidence-based implications for migration-related policies and interventions.

Keywords: Gender, Socio-Economic, Culture, Community, Development

I. Introduction

Migration involves a shift in one's "center of gravity" (Hägerstrand, 1957, p. 27), meaning movement from one place to another. In contrast, immobility refers to staying in the same place over time, with no significant change in location (Schewel, 2019). Although we live in the "Age of Migration" (Castles & Miller, 1993, 2009), marked by high levels of border-crossing, there is also an "immobility paradox" (Malmberg, 1997), in which much of the world's population remains immobile despite global migration trends.

Mobility and immobility are deeply connected throughout a person's life. Mobility is often seen as a natural part of life, as people move for better jobs, social connections, or environmental reasons. Immobility, however, is not simply the absence of movement; it is a state shaped by socio-economic, cultural, and political factors (Schewel, 2019; Salazar, 2021).

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The idea that we are all constantly "on the move" (Cresswell, 2006) suggests that mobility and immobility can coexist as choices or constraints within a single person's life.

Globally, six out of seven people remain in their country of birth (Schewel, 2019). In 2020, only 281 million people, or 3.6% of the world's population, were international migrants (McAuliffe et al., 2021). This means that 96.4% of people do not migrate internationally, highlighting the widespread nature of immobility. Recent studies suggest that immobility is not merely a lack of means to move but is influenced by socio-economic, political, cultural, and environmental factors (Carling & Collins, 2018; Salazar, 2021). Events such as the 9/11 attacks and the COVID-19 pandemic have further drawn attention to immobility by disrupting global movement.

In Bangladesh, international migration has long been an important economic strategy. Remittances from migrant workers play a key role in the country's development, with Bangladesh receiving nearly US\$21 billion in 2022 alone (World Economic Forum, 2023). Despite these benefits, most Bangladeshis do not migrate. Structural trade policies that bolster the shadow economy, including non-tariff barriers and limited trade freedom, trap workers in informal sectors with low prospects for mobility (Uddin et al., 2025). Although over 13 million Bangladeshis have migrated overseas for work since 1976, women made up only 13.85% of this total in 2018 (BMET, 2020; RMMRU, 2019). This gap indicates that significant barriers to migration persist, especially for women.

These barriers are even more pronounced in Rangpur, a region in northern Bangladesh. Rangpur has one of the lowest rates of international migration in the country: only about 0.6% of households have family members working abroad, well below the rates in other regions (BBS, 2015). This immobility is driven by economic underdevelopment, low literacy rates, limited job opportunities, and strong social norms that restrict movement, particularly for women (Khan & Haque, 2021). The overseas employment rate in Rangpur is just 1.8%, the lowest in Bangladesh (BMET, 2022). These interlocking challenges make Rangpur an important site for the study of immobility.

This study uses Schewel's (2019) aspiration-capability framework to explain why people in Rangpur choose to stay or are forced to stay. The framework distinguishes between the desire to migrate (aspiration) and the ability to do so (capability), providing a clear lens for analyzing the factors behind immobility. The research question guiding this study is: how do aspirations and capabilities interact to produce different forms of immobility among men and women in Rangpur? By focusing on this understudied region, the study sheds light on the socio-economic and gendered reasons why people stay, even as global trends encourage movement, and informs policies that address the needs of both mobile and immobile populations.

II. Literature Review and Research Framework

The literature on immobility highlights gender as a critical factor influencing mobility decisions. Women in Rangpur and other socio-economically disadvantaged areas face multiple layers of constraints that limit their ability to migrate, ranging from cultural and familial obligations to economic barriers and limited access to migration networks. Mata-Codesal (2017) and Mahler and Pessar (2006) emphasise the gendered dimensions of immobility, showing how patriarchal norms and gender-specific roles restrict women's mobility and exacerbate regional immobility trends. Evidence from Bangladesh further shows that when



husbands migrate internationally, often leaving wives immobile due to these norms, the separation can harm wives' mental health through increased household responsibilities, emotional isolation, and financial dependency, although remittances may provide some socio-economic relief (Shimul, Uddin, & Roknuzzaman, 2025). These hidden psychosocial costs illustrate how women's aspirations for mobility are curtailed, leading to involuntary immobility.

Comparative studies from other developing countries provide additional insights. Research in Sub-Saharan Africa shows that while aspiration to migrate is high, actual migration rates remain low due to economic constraints, legal barriers, and social factors (Jonsson, 2019; Bakewell, 2020). Similar findings emerge in South Asia, where socio-cultural norms and economic hardships significantly hinder mobility, particularly for marginalised communities (Thieme, 2017). These studies frame immobility not merely as a failure to migrate but as a complex socio-economic and cultural phenomenon shaped by local and global factors.

Recent studies have expanded the theoretical and empirical understanding of immobility. Schewel (2019) and Carling (2020) introduce frameworks that distinguish between voluntary and involuntary immobility, showing how individuals may choose to remain in their place of origin for personal or cultural attachments (voluntary immobility) or due to insurmountable barriers (involuntary immobility).

Recent work by de Haas (2010) and Collins (2019) further suggests that immobility can be a rational response to uncertain or risky migration prospects. In regions with weak socio-economic infrastructure, the perceived risks of migration, such as exploitation, loss of social support, or failure to secure stable employment abroad, can act as significant deterrents, leading individuals to choose immobility as a safer, albeit constrained, option.

The aspiration-capability framework, developed by Schewel (2019) and building on Carling's (2002) earlier work, offers a comprehensive approach to (im)mobility. It distinguishes between the desire to migrate (aspiration) and the ability to do so (capability), identifying three categories of immobility: voluntary, involuntary, and acquiescent. This study applies the framework to explore why some people in Rangpur want to migrate but cannot, while others can migrate but choose not to.

Many people in Rangpur face socio-economic challenges and wish to migrate in search of better opportunities, yet they often lack the money, social connections, or knowledge to do so. The framework helps analyse how economic conditions and gender norms shape these aspirations. It also distinguishes those who cannot migrate due to barriers (involuntary immobility) from those who choose not to migrate (voluntary immobility), and considers cases in which people neither aspire to nor can migrate (acquiescent immobility).

The framework is particularly relevant for Rangpur, where traditional gender roles and socio-economic challenges significantly shape migration decisions. Women are often expected to stay home and care for their families, limiting their ability or desire to migrate. The aspiration-capability framework accounts for these gendered barriers, making it well suited to studying Rangpur.

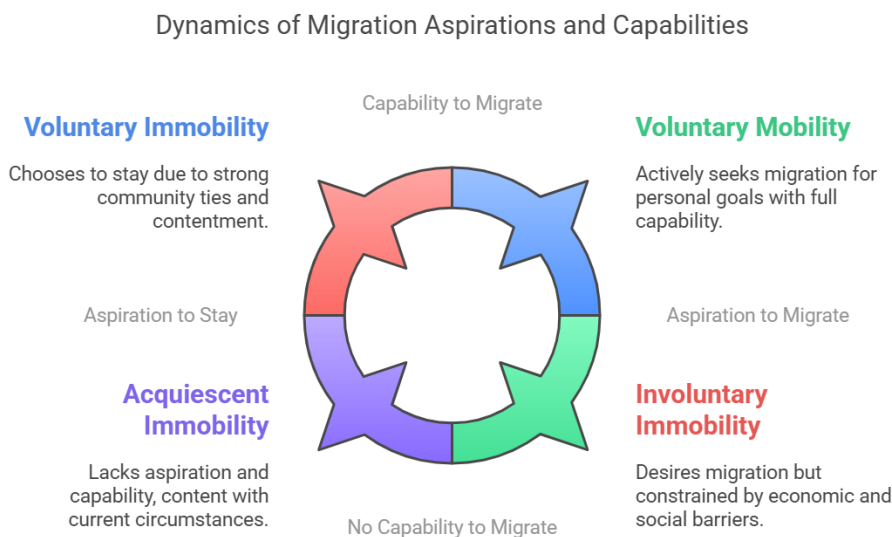
Earlier theories, such as Ravenstein's (1885) push-pull model and later network theory, offer partial explanations. The push-pull model accounts for factors that drive people away from home (such as poverty) and draw them toward new destinations (such as jobs), but it does

not explain why some people aspire to migrate yet cannot, or why others choose not to relocate. Network theory explains how social connections facilitate migration, yet it cannot account for people with strong networks who still do not migrate, and it overlooks individual aspirations and capabilities.

In contrast, the aspiration-capability framework integrates aspirations and abilities, offering a more complete understanding of immobility. It considers how socio-economic, cultural, and gender factors shape migration decisions, making it the most appropriate lens for studying immobility in Rangpur.

Using this framework (see Figure 1), the study identifies different types of immobility in Rangpur and examines how poverty, lack of education, limited job opportunities, and strict gender norms contribute to both voluntary and involuntary immobility. Applying the framework reveals the root causes of immobility in Rangpur and provides a deeper understanding of how different forms of immobility coexist and interact within the same community.

Figure 1 (Im)mobility categories suggested by the aspiration-capability framework



Source (adapted) and credit: Schewel 2019

Figure 1 presents the (im)mobility categories derived from Schewel's (2019) aspiration-capability framework. The framework is organised around two dimensions: aspiration (the desire to migrate or to stay) and capability (the ability to migrate). Crossing these two dimensions yields four categories. Voluntary mobility occurs when a person both aspires to migrate and has the capability to do so. Voluntary immobility occurs when a person has the ability to migrate but chooses to remain, often due to strong community ties, cultural preservation, or personal contentment. Involuntary immobility arises when a person aspires



to migrate but lacks the capability, typically due to economic, gendered, or institutional barriers. Acquiescent immobility describes those who neither aspire to migrate nor have the capability to do so, often due to socio-economic embeddedness and cultural contentment. This two-by-two structure guides the analysis throughout the paper by allowing each participant's experience to be located within a specific category of (im)mobility.

III. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the factors contributing to immobility in Rangpur, Bangladesh, guided by Schewel's Aspiration-Capability Framework. Qualitative methods were selected to capture participants' lived experiences, enabling an in-depth understanding of aspirations, capabilities, and socio-cultural influences on (im)mobility. Data collection took place from November 2023 to June 2024, focusing on Rangpur city and the surrounding districts within the Rangpur division.

1. Philosophical Underpinnings

The study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which posits that reality is socially constructed and best understood through participants' subjective experiences. This approach aligns with the Aspiration-Capability Framework, emphasizing the interplay between individual aspirations and structural capabilities. By prioritizing participants' voices, the research aims to uncover the emic perspectives on immobility, rather than imposing external interpretations.

2. Research Design

A multi-method qualitative design was utilized, incorporating semi-structured interviews, life histories, focus group discussions (FGDs), and participant observations. This design facilitates data triangulation, enhancing the depth and credibility of findings by cross-verifying insights from multiple sources. The study is exploratory, seeking to generate rich, contextual data on voluntary, involuntary, and acquiescent immobility in a socio-economically disadvantaged region.

3. Study Setting

The research was conducted in Rangpur, a northern division of Bangladesh characterized by economic underdevelopment, low literacy rates, and limited international migration (BBS, 2015; BMET, 2022). Rangpur city served as the primary site, with participants recruited from urban and peri-urban areas across districts such as Rangpur, Gaibandha, and Kurigram. This setting was chosen due to its low overseas employment rate (1.8%) and pronounced gender disparities in mobility, making it ideal for examining immobility dynamics.

4. Participant Selection and Sampling

Participants were purposively selected to ensure diversity in gender, age, socioeconomic status, education, and occupation, reflecting the heterogeneous population affected by immobility. The sample included 32 individuals: 16 men and 16 women, aged 22 to 55 years, with education levels ranging from primary to tertiary. Occupations encompassed formally employed professionals (e.g., teachers, administrators), informally employed workers (e.g., daily wage laborers, street vendors), and unemployed individuals from middle- and lower-

income groups. Special attention was given to marginalized groups, such as Indigenous communities (e.g., Santal), to capture intersectional experiences.

Snowball sampling was employed, starting with key informants identified through local networks and referrals. This non-probability method was appropriate for accessing hard-to-reach populations in a culturally sensitive context, where trust and community connections are essential. Recruitment continued until data saturation was achieved, at which point no new themes emerged from additional data.

Details of the participants are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Details about study participants

District	Interviewee	Age	Sex	Education	Occupation	Duration
Rangpur	1	28	Male	Undergraduate	University Student	18 minutes
	2	35	Female	Secondary School	Homemaker	16 minutes
Dinajpur	3	42	Male	Primary School	Plumber	20 minutes
	4	50	Female	No Formal Education	Agricultural Laborer	15 minutes
	5	30	Male	Post-graduate	Teacher	17 minutes
	6	25	Female	Secondary School	Street Vendor	19 minutes
	7	45	Male	Primary School	Day Laborer	16 minutes
	8	55	Female	No Formal Education	Small-Scale Artisan	18 minutes
Gaibandha	9	32	Male	Undergraduate	Entrepreneur	20 minutes
	10	29	Female	Secondary School	Homemaker	15 minutes
	11	40	Male	Primary School	Farmer	17 minutes
	12	48	Female	No Formal Education	Informal Shopkeeper	16 minutes
Kurigram	13	27	Male	Undergraduate	University Student	18 minutes
	14	34	Female	Secondary School	Homemaker	19 minutes
	15	38	Male	Primary School	Agricultural Laborer	15 minutes
Lalmonirhat	16	52	Female	No Formal Education	Daily Wage Laborer	20 minutes
	17	31	Male	Post-graduate	Government Employee	17 minutes
	18	26	Female	Secondary School	Homemaker	16 minutes
	19	44	Male	Primary School	Plumber	18 minutes



District	Interviewee	Age	Sex	Education	Occupation	Duration
	20	49	Female	No Formal Education	Agricultural Laborer	15 minutes
Nilphamari	21	33	Male	Post-graduate	Teacher	19 minutes
	22	28	Female	Secondary School	Street Vendor	17 minutes
	23	41	Male	Primary School	Day Laborer	16 minutes
	24	54	Female	No Formal Education	Small-Scale Artisan	20 minutes
Panchagarh	25	29	Male	Undergraduate	Entrepreneur	18 minutes
	26	24	Female	Secondary School	Homemaker	15 minutes
	27	39	Male	Primary School	Farmer	17 minutes
Thakurgaon	28	47	Female	No Formal Education	Informal Shopkeeper	16 minutes
	29	30	Male	Undergraduate	University Student	19 minutes
	30	35	Female	Secondary School	Homemaker	18 minutes
	31	43	Male	Primary School	Agricultural Laborer	15 minutes
	32	51	Female	No Formal Education	Daily Wage Laborer	20 minutes

Source: Field Study, 2024

5. Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through a combination of methods to provide a holistic view of immobility. Thirty-two in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted, each lasting 45–90 minutes. An interview guide was used to cover topics such as migration aspirations, barriers, community ties, and gender norms, with flexibility to probe emergent themes. Narrative life histories were gathered from 10 participants to explore longitudinal experiences of (im)mobility and trace personal trajectories influenced by socio-economic and cultural factors. Four FGDs were held (two gender-segregated, one for men and one for women, and two mixed), each with 6–8 participants. These sessions facilitated discussion of shared experiences of immobility, including economic constraints and cultural preservation. Informal observations were conducted during community interactions, festivals, and daily activities in Rangpur to contextualize verbal data with behavioral insights, noting gender roles and social norms in action.

All sessions were audio-recorded with consent and conducted in Bengali, with the researcher fluent in the language to ensure cultural sensitivity. Field notes were maintained to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details.

6. Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis followed a thematic approach, informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Transcripts were first translated into English and anonymized. Initial coding involved familiarization with the data and generating open codes to identify patterns. Manual coding grouped codes into categories (e.g., economic constraints, gendered barriers), aligned with Schewel's framework categories (voluntary, involuntary, acquiescent immobility). Selective coding refined themes, with constant comparison across data sources to ensure consistency. Triangulation across methods (interviews, life histories, FGDs, observations) and member checking (sharing summaries with participants for validation) were employed to strengthen analytical rigor.

7. Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure trustworthiness, criteria from Lincoln and Guba (1985) were applied: credibility through prolonged engagement and triangulation; transferability through thick descriptions of context; dependability through an audit trail of decisions; and confirmability through maintaining reflexivity journals to address researcher biases (e.g., as an outsider to Rangpur). Reflexivity involved acknowledging the researcher's positionality and its potential influence on interpretations.

8. Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and institutional guidelines. Informed consent was obtained in writing, explaining the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits. Participation was voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonyms and storing data securely on password-protected devices, accessible only to the research team. Sensitive topics were handled with care, allowing participants to skip questions, and referrals to local support services were provided if distress arose. Cultural norms, particularly gender sensitivities, were respected by conducting gender-appropriate sessions and involving local facilitators where needed.

9. Potential Limitations and Biases

Purposive and snowball sampling may introduce selection bias, as participants were accessed via networks, potentially overlooking isolated individuals. Mitigation included diversifying recruitment sources. Social desirability bias was possible, with participants providing expected responses; this was addressed through rapport-building and assurances of anonymity. The qualitative nature invites interpretive subjectivity, countered by team analysis and cross-verification. The study's focus on Rangpur limits generalizability, though findings offer transferable insights. The three-month data collection period may miss seasonal variations; future longitudinal studies could address this.

IV. Findings

1. Involuntary Immobility

Involuntary immobility refers to individuals who aspire to migrate but are unable to do so due to external barriers (Carling, 2001). In Rangpur, this phenomenon is particularly prevalent among young adults and women, driven by economic hardships, entrenched patriarchal



norms, and restrictive institutional policies. This study reveals economic, gendered, and institutional barriers that drive involuntary immobility in Rangpur. While young men primarily face financial constraints, women grapple with a combination of monetary limitations, patriarchal norms, and restrictive policies. These overlapping barriers create a challenging environment for individuals who aspire to migrate but cannot.

1.1. Economic Constraints

Economic challenges emerged as a significant barrier to migration for many individuals in Rangpur. Young men and women expressed frustration over their inability to afford the costs associated with migration or higher education. For instance, a 24-year-old male university graduate shared his story: *"I am about to complete my undergraduate degree, but there are no well-paying jobs here for someone at my level. I want to pursue higher studies abroad and eventually settle there, but my father cannot afford the tuition fees. My academic results are not exceptional, so getting a scholarship is unlikely. I feel stuck here, unable to achieve my dreams."* Similarly, a 32-year-old daily wage laborer explained his situation:

"I barely earn enough to meet my family's basic needs. Saving money to go abroad? That is not even something I can dream of. Migration feels like a luxury I will never afford." Even middle-income professionals face financial barriers. A 40-year-old teacher in Rangpur noted, *"I have a steady income, but the cost of migration is too high. Taking a loan feels risky because there is no guarantee of success abroad. It is frustrating to have the desire but not the means to pursue it."* These narratives highlight how financial constraints prevent many individuals, regardless of their educational or professional backgrounds, from pursuing their migration aspirations.

1.2. Gendered Barriers

Women in Rangpur face additional layers of challenges due to patriarchal norms and societal expectations. These barriers align with Mahler and Pessar's (2001) concept of "gendered geographies of power," which emphasizes how structural inequalities limit women's mobility. A 26-year-old married female university student shared her experience, *"I have excellent grades and a strong chance of securing a scholarship to study abroad. However, my husband and his family will not allow me to go. They believe my place is here, prioritizing family over my ambitions. I have no choice but to abandon my dreams."* A 35-year-old single mother highlighted her struggles, *"Even if I had the financial means, who would take care of my children? As a woman, I am expected to stay here and raise them. Moving abroad to chase my dreams is not an option for me."* Another young woman, aged 22, explained during an interview: *"My family disapproves of me moving abroad alone. They worry about my safety and reputation. These restrictions make it impossible for me to pursue opportunities overseas, despite my strong aspirations."* These stories illustrate how cultural expectations and gendered roles create significant barriers for women, limiting their ability to act on their migration aspirations.

1.3. Institutional Constraints

In addition to socio-cultural barriers, institutional policies also restrict women's ability to migrate. For example, legal restrictions prevent women under 24 from migrating for work (GAATW, 2022), exacerbating their challenges. A 38-year-old female academic professional said, *"I want to move abroad for better opportunities for my children and myself. However, my current job does not offer the flexibility to leave without risking my position. The uncertainty of finding work abroad also holds me back. It is a difficult balance to navigate."* A university administrator in Rangpur added, *"Our institutional policies do not support women who want to balance work and migration. This discourages*

them from exploring opportunities abroad, even when they have the capabilities and qualifications.” These accounts reveal how institutional rigidity reinforces societal expectations, creating additional hurdles for women who aspire to migrate.

The interviews reveal a clear pattern: economic constraints are a significant barrier for both men and women, but women face additional layers of challenges due to patriarchal norms and institutional policies. These overlapping barriers create a complex web of immobility, making it difficult for many in Rangpur to achieve their migration aspirations.

2. Voluntary Immobility

Voluntary immobility refers to individuals who choose to stay in their place of origin despite being able to migrate. This decision is often influenced by strong community ties, cultural preservation, perceived risks of migration, and personal contentment (Schewel, 2019). This study examines how community ties, cultural and spiritual preservation, perceived migration risks, and family responsibilities are key factors driving voluntary immobility in Rangpur. Participants consistently valued stability and connection over the uncertainties of migration, even when they had the means to relocate.

2.1. Community Ties and Stability

Many participants expressed satisfaction with their current lives, emphasising the importance of family, professional stability, and community connections. For example, a university teacher shared, *“I have a prestigious and stable job here, and my spouse also works in a government position. Our salaries allow us to live comfortably. I see no reason to move abroad, where I might face challenges like finding a suitable job, language barriers, or cultural shocks. I feel fortunate to care for my parents, relatives, and friends. I love my community and my country, and I do not want to leave.”* Similarly, a young professional explained, *“My family and friends are my greatest support system. Leaving them behind for an uncertain future abroad feels unnecessary and unwise.”* An entrepreneur echoed this sentiment, *“I have built a successful business here, and my customers are like family. I cannot imagine starting over in a foreign country where I might face prejudice or struggle to connect with the local community.”* These stories highlight how emotional security and professional stability often outweigh the potential benefits of migration.

2.2. Cultural and Spiritual Preservation

Cultural and spiritual values also significantly influence voluntary immobility, particularly among women. A married woman explained, *“I have a large family and many responsibilities, including caring for other family members. I also worry about whether my children and I could maintain our religious and cultural practices if we moved to a developed country. Given these factors, I am not willing to take the risk of moving abroad.”* A retired teacher emphasized the importance of cultural traditions: *“For generations, our family has celebrated local festivals and rituals together. If I migrate, I will lose touch with these traditions. That is not a sacrifice I am willing to make.”* A single mother shared a similar perspective, *“I want my children to understand their roots, speak our language, and embrace our customs. Moving abroad might offer financial benefits, but it could cost us our cultural identity.”* These narratives show how cultural and spiritual ties anchor individuals to their communities, making migration less appealing.



2.3. Perceived Risks of Migration

The perceived risks and uncertainties of migration also influence decisions to stay. These risks include job insecurity, cultural alienation, and the need to adapt to a new environment. A government employee shared, *"I have heard stories of people going abroad and struggling to find work, facing discrimination, or losing their savings. I do not want to put myself or my family through that uncertainty."* A young professional expressed similar concerns, *"It is not just about getting a job abroad. It is about being away from everything familiar—friends, family, and even the food I love. I am afraid of feeling isolated."* These accounts highlight how fear of the unknown often deters individuals from pursuing migration, even when they have the means to do so.

2.4. Family Obligations and Responsibilities

Family responsibilities, particularly for women, are another key factor in voluntary immobility. Many participants cited caregiving roles as a reason for staying in Rangpur. A female respondent explained, *"My parents are elderly and depend on me. Leaving them behind for a better-paying job abroad would feel selfish and wrong."* A father of two shared a similar perspective, *"My children are in school here, and I do not want to disrupt their education or uproot them from their friends and routines. Staying here ensures their stability."* Young women emphasized their role as caregivers and the cultural expectation to prioritize family over personal ambitions. Thus, the interviews reveal a clear pattern: while economic opportunities abroad may be appealing, many individuals in Rangpur prioritize stability, cultural identity, and family ties over the uncertainties of migration. These factors create a strong sense of belonging and contentment, making voluntary immobility a rational and deeply personal choice for many.

3. Acquiescent Immobility

Acquiescent immobility refers to individuals who lack the aspiration and the capability to migrate, often due to socio-economic embeddedness and cultural contentment (Schewel, 2019). This study finds that in Rangpur, this form of immobility is pervasive among marginalized groups, such as informal laborers and Indigenous communities. Their decisions to stay are shaped by financial constraints, cultural ties, a sense of satisfaction with their local environment, limited awareness, and a desire for emotional security. Marginalized groups, particularly informal laborers and Indigenous communities, are often deeply embedded in their local environments, finding comfort and identity in their current circumstances. These findings highlight the importance of addressing informational and structural barriers while respecting cultural and community ties in migration-related policies.

3.1. Socio-Economic Embeddedness

Economic constraints and financial contentment play a significant role in acquiescent immobility. Many participants described how limited resources or reliance on local income sources deterred them from considering migration. For example, a plumber shared, *"I work as a plumber and can support my family financially. However, I do not have the funds to migrate abroad. I know friends who have gone overseas by borrowing money or selling property, but I do not have the resources or the desire to leave. I am content with my life here, surrounded by family, friends, and community."* Similarly, a street vendor highlighted migration risks: *"I earn a stable income selling fruits in the market. It is not much, but it is enough to get by. Why would I risk everything to go abroad when I might lose even this small security?"* These stories illustrate how financial stability can discourage individuals from pursuing migration, even at a modest level.

3.2. Cultural and Community Contentment

Deep-rooted cultural and social ties often prevent marginalized groups from aspiring to migrate. For many participants, their local community provides a sense of belonging and emotional security, outweighing the perceived benefits of migration. A woman from the Santal community expressed, *“Our religion and community are central to our lives. We celebrate festivals together, help each other in times of need, and share a unique way of life. If I went abroad, I would lose all of this. I prefer to stay where I belong.”* An agricultural laborer also emphasized the importance of ancestral lands,

“I inherited this small plot of land from my father, which connects me to my family’s history. Moving abroad would mean leaving behind everything that defines who I am.” These narratives highlight how cultural and community ties anchor individuals to their local environment, making migration unattractive.

3.3. Limited Awareness and Opportunities

For some participants, immobility stemmed from a lack of awareness about migration opportunities or perceived barriers to success abroad. This was especially true among low-income individuals with limited access to information or networks. A day laborer remarked, *“I do not know how to apply for jobs abroad or who to contact. It feels like something for educated and connected people, not someone like me.”* A rural youth stated, *“Migration seems like a distant dream. I do not know anyone who has successfully migrated, so I have no idea how to begin.”* These accounts reveal how a lack of information and social networks can prevent individuals from considering migration a viable option.

3.4. Psychological and Emotional Comfort

For many, the comfort and familiarity of their local environment outweigh the uncertainties of starting anew abroad. This psychological stability often leads to a lack of aspiration to migrate. A middle-aged respondent explained, *“I know this place, the people, and how things work. Abroad, I would have to start from scratch, which I am not ready for. It is easier to stay where I feel secure.”* Another informal shopkeeper participant echoed this sentiment, *“Life here is simple, but it is predictable. I know what to expect each day. Moving abroad feels like jumping into the unknown, and I am not ready for that.”* These stories highlight how emotional comfort and familiarity with one’s surroundings can discourage individuals from pursuing migration.

Thus, the interviews reveal that acquiescent immobility is not merely a lack of opportunity but a deliberate choice shaped by financial stability, cultural identity, and emotional comfort. For many in Rangpur, the risks and uncertainties of migration outweigh the potential benefits, making staying a rational and profoundly personal decision. Addressing these factors requires policies that respect local values while creating opportunities for those who wish to stay.

4. Cultural and Religious Contentment

This study reveals that cultural and religious contentment, combined with a strong connection to ancestral lands and robust community support systems, significantly contributes to immobility among marginalized groups. For many individuals, particularly those from Indigenous and marginalized communities, cultural and religious ties serve as powerful anchors, discouraging migration even when economic incentives exist. This preference reflects a deep connection to ancestral lands, traditions, and community networks, which are often seen as essential to personal identity and well-being.



4.1. Importance of Cultural and Religious Identity

Cultural and religious identity play a central role in shaping decisions to stay. Many participants expressed a strong attachment to their traditions and way of life, which they feared they would lose if they migrated. A woman from the Santal community shared, *“Our religion and community are central to our lives, and we do not want to compromise our beliefs. If I went abroad and encountered problems, who would help me? I prefer not to face such challenges.”* Similarly, a community elder explained, *“Our festivals, rituals, and way of life define us. Moving to a foreign place would mean leaving all of that behind. It is not just about money but about who we are as people.”* These narratives highlight how cultural and religious identity can outweigh economic motivations, making migration unattractive.

4.2. Connection to Ancestral Lands

For many Indigenous participants, ancestral lands hold deep emotional and cultural significance. This connection often outweighs the potential economic benefits of migration. A young farmer shared, *“This land has been in my family for generations. It provides not only food but also a sense of purpose and belonging. Leaving it would feel like abandoning my ancestors.”* An older participant echoed this sentiment, *“Our land connects us to our history and community. Despite hardships, we find strength in staying together and preserving what our forefathers left us.”* These stories illustrate how ancestral lands are not just a source of livelihood but also a cornerstone of cultural identity and continuity.

4.3. Community Support Systems

Strong community support systems also significantly help discourage migration. The bonds of mutual assistance within these communities provide a sense of security and belonging that is hard to replicate elsewhere. A small-scale artisan noted, *“When someone in the community faces trouble, we all come together to help. This sense of unity is hard to find elsewhere. Abroad, you might be alone, with no one to turn to.”* Observations of daily life in these communities further highlighted the importance of these support systems. Shared activities like group farming, collective celebrations, and mutual caregiving were part of daily life, reinforcing the preference to remain rooted.

Thus, the interviews and observations reveal that cultural and religious identity, ancestral ties, and community support systems are deeply intertwined, creating a strong sense of belonging and contentment. For many in marginalized communities, these factors outweigh the potential economic benefits of migration, making staying a deliberate and meaningful choice. Addressing these non-economic motivations requires policies that respect cultural identities and strengthen local support systems, ensuring that migration remains a choice rather than a necessity.

V. Discussion

This study examines the socio-economic and gendered aspects of immobility in Rangpur, Bangladesh, using the Aspiration-Capability Framework to analyze voluntary, involuntary, and passive immobility. While much research focuses on migration as a sign of development, this study highlights the importance of understanding immobility as a complex, context-driven phenomenon. The findings align with global studies, such as those by Jonsson (2019) and

Bakewell (2020), which explored a balanced view of mobility and immobility in policy and research.

The study reveals that economic barriers and gender norms are key drivers of involuntary immobility, especially among young adults and women. These findings support Carling's (2001) concept of involuntary immobility, in which external obstacles block migration aspirations. The study extends this by showing how gender norms, as described by Mahler and Pessar (2006), create additional challenges. Women often face societal pressure to prioritise family duties over personal goals, reflecting Mata-Codesal's (2017) insights on gendered immobility. They are frequently discouraged from pursuing education or jobs abroad, highlighting the cultural barriers in patriarchal societies such as Rangpur. These patterns mirror global research, including Jonsson's (2019) study of the Soninke, which emphasises how socio-economic and legal barriers limit mobility.

Economic challenges further deepen involuntary immobility. For instance, young male graduates often lack the money or social networks needed to migrate, supporting Schewel's (2019) argument that structural factors such as poverty and limited resources drive involuntary immobility. These findings highlight the need for policies that address economic inequalities and promote gender equity in migration opportunities.

The study also explores voluntary immobility, in which individuals choose to remain despite the ability to migrate. Factors such as strong community ties, cultural preservation, and stable jobs are significant and align with Schewel's (2019) concept of "retain" factors. Many participants expressed satisfaction with their local community and cultural life, echoing Myers' (2000) findings on how cultural and religious values shape migration decisions. For women, voluntary immobility often reflects their role as keepers of artistic and spiritual traditions, similar to Gardner's (1993) observations on moral and cultural barriers to migration. These insights enrich our understanding of why people may choose to stay, even when opportunities abroad exist.

Finally, the study identifies acquiescent immobility, in which individuals neither aspire to nor can migrate due to resignation or contentment with their circumstances. This supports Schewel's (2019) concept of acquiescent immobility but adds new dimensions by highlighting the experiences of marginalized groups, such as Indigenous communities. For example, members of the Santal community expressed satisfaction with their cultural and social networks despite economic challenges. This aligns with Fischer et al.'s (1997) idea that strong social and cultural ties make migration less appealing.

These findings challenge Ravenstein's (1885) assumption that migration is driven solely by economic incentives. Instead, they show that immobility can be a rational and strategic choice shaped by cultural, social, and economic factors. This calls for a more nuanced understanding of migration and immobility in policy and research.

VI. Implications

1. Theoretical Implications

This study shows that young adults and women are particularly affected by involuntary immobility due to economic barriers and patriarchal norms. These findings support Carling's (2001) concept of involuntary immobility, in which structural obstacles prevent migration



despite aspirations. However, the study goes further by revealing how gender norms worsen immobility, especially for women. For example, women often face challenges such as family responsibilities and societal expectations, aligning with Mahler and Pessar's (2006) concept of "gendered geographies of power." This suggests expanding the Aspiration-Capability Framework to include the combined effects of economic and cultural barriers, particularly in patriarchal societies.

Some participants chose to stay despite the option to migrate, citing community ties, stable jobs, and cultural preservation. This aligns with Schewel's (2019) idea of "retaining" factors, such as family and cultural connections, that encourage people to stay. For women, voluntary immobility often reflected a desire to uphold religious and cultural practices, similar to findings by Myers (2000) and Gardner (1993). This highlights the importance of cultural embeddedness in migration decisions, a theme that should be further explored in theoretical frameworks.

The study also identifies acquiescent immobility, in which individuals lack both the desire and the ability to migrate. This category, marked by contentment or resignation to barriers, supports Schewel's (2019) and Mata-Codesal's (2017) work on passive immobility. However, insights from marginalized groups, like Indigenous communities, suggest that acquiescent immobility can also result from systemic neglect and discrimination. This calls for an intersectional approach in migration studies to address how multiple disadvantages shape immobility.

2. Practical Implications

Several policy implications follow directly from the findings. First, the economic barriers identified in the involuntary immobility section—limited finances, weak migration networks, and the high cost of migration—call for targeted skills training, low-interest migration financing, and pre-departure orientation programmes that equip aspiring migrants in Rangpur with marketable skills and reliable information. Second, the gendered barriers reported by women participants, patriarchal norms, family duties, and restrictive institutional policies, require gender-specific interventions, including women's education and vocational programmes, safe-migration corridors, and the reform of institutional rules that restrict women's mobility. Third, the cultural and religious contentment underlying voluntary and acquiescent immobility suggests that policy should not treat migration as the only path to well-being; investments in local education, healthcare, and infrastructure can expand in-place opportunities for those who choose to stay. Engaging religious and community leaders in these efforts can help challenge patriarchal norms while respecting cultural identity, ensuring that migration remains a genuine choice rather than a necessity.

VII. Conclusion

This study explores immobility in Rangpur, Bangladesh, by applying Schewel's (2019) aspiration-capability framework. For men, immobility is often tied to limited job opportunities, weak migration networks, cultural attitudes, and a preference for staying in one place. Although migration is widely seen as a sign of economic success and masculinity, many men in Rangpur either cannot or choose not to migrate. For women, immobility is shaped primarily by patriarchal norms and socio-cultural barriers. Even when women want better

economic or educational opportunities abroad, traditional gender roles, family duties, and societal expectations usually prevent them from migrating.

The study identifies key factors behind immobility in Rangpur and points to several avenues for further research. Longitudinal studies could track how mobility aspirations and capabilities change over time as socio-economic conditions and government policies evolve. Comparative research across regions of Bangladesh would reveal how different contexts shape immobility and highlight transferable policy solutions. Building on these findings, future research can deepen understanding of immobility and inform policies that address the needs of both mobile and immobile populations, contributing to a more inclusive account of migration and development.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, its qualitative design captures rich, contextual evidence but does not allow statistical generalisation. Second, the small, purposive sample of 32 participants, drawn through snowball sampling, may over-represent individuals connected to existing networks and under-represent the most isolated households; findings therefore speak to transferability rather than representativeness. Third, the study focuses on a single region and its specific socio-economic and cultural configuration, so the patterns identified may not hold in other parts of Bangladesh or beyond. Fourth, the cross-sectional design captures aspirations and capabilities at a single moment and cannot show how they evolve over the life course or in response to seasonal and economic shocks. Future research combining longitudinal, mixed-method, and multi-site designs would help address these limitations.

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