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Notes From the Field
**Development and Daughters:
Changing Familial Roles in Rural Bangladesh**

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Abstract

The now-globalized economy has had far-reaching effects on family structure and gender roles around the world. One striking aspect of globalization is the rapid expansion of a global labor market resulting in large waves of labor migration. The effects of labor out-migration of men from rural Bangladesh have not yet been well documented, but preliminary data show that these effects may be surprising and profound. The absence of men in many rural Bangladeshi families necessitates a change in how women's roles are perceived and experienced. As men leave for work, women may be buffering the effects of economic development on their families by taking on the duties once held by their husbands and brothers.

Keywords

Economic development, women's roles, son preference, South Asia, Bangladesh, field work

Introduction

I lived in Bangladesh for six months. Every day I wore *slawar-kameez* and sandals, ate fish and rice, practiced speaking Bangla, and rode in rickshaws. With the help of two wonderful research assistants, we spent weeks interviewing women in rural Bangladesh about their lives. We asked about the past, we asked about the future, and we asked how things have changed in their lifetime. The goal was to qualitatively and quantitatively understand the demographic transition and rapid fertility decline in our study area.

On an interview in the village three young girls, maybe 9 to 11 years old, darken the doorway immediately to my left. For ninety minutes my field assistant and I speak to the older woman – their grandmother – and for ninety minutes I feel their eyes on me. They watch me move, shift in my chair, take notes, nod my head.

When I look directly at the girls, their eyes widen. One looks

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to the floor, the other two smile sheepishly. I cannot decide who is embarrassed here – is it me? I am flattered that they find me so mesmerizing. Their mother comes into the room and greets me. She has just come home from work. The girls smile excitedly at their mother as if to say, ‘Look! A *bideshi* (foreigner) is in our house!’

We get up to leave the *bari*¹ and the girls watch intently as I put on my shoes. I look at them and smile, turn my head slightly to look at them out of the side of my eyes, inviting them to speak. Nothing. So I wave goodbye. They take a half step back and giggle. I try again to get them to speak, ‘*Abar dekha hobe.*’ They light up, understanding me, but still they remain silent.

At the end of the path to the *bari* I stop and look back. The three girls are now on the porch, standing in the same formation but away from the doorway. I smile and – finally! – they wave furiously and happily. I wave back, relieved they are not frightened of me.

Three girls, three daughters.

It is typical that the girls are in the *bari* when I am doing interviews. They are often kept closer to home for modesty and safety. They go to school, but when they are home the girls stay close to their female relatives. Maybe their brothers are at school or at work. Maybe they are out playing cricket in the field. Or maybe they have no brothers. It’s difficult to know for certain because boys are not usually at home during the day when I do interviews. Most places outside of the *bari* are masculine space – the market, the sports fields, the streets, the tea stalls – so the boys wander more freely through public areas. Even as an outsider I can feel the awkwardness of my public appearances at the bazaar because I am a woman and the bazaar, like all public space, is for men.

Background

In Bangladesh, women’s space exists inside the *bari*. Modesty and purity are of the utmost importance for women in Bangladesh, where social norms are based on traditional patrilineal and patrilocal family structures as well as on Islamic ideology. A girl will remain a part of her father’s household until her parents arrange her marriage and she moves to her husband’s father’s household. This pattern of girls moving away from their natal families to become a contributing member of another family is one major reason Bangladeshi parents

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tend to show preference for having sons. The other reason is that sons participate in the economy as workers who fetch an income for their family. Daughters, on the other hand, have important domestic and care-giving duties but do not usually bring in any income.² As one respondent put it, 'You raise your daughter for another's family, but you raise your son for yourself.'

Land rights and land inheritance are extremely important in this densely-populated country. Families divide their lands among their sons and – in Islamic families – among their daughters.³ Plots of family land become more fragmented with every generation and land disputes between family members are not uncommon (Zaman, 2005). Small plots of land are worth arguing over because even a field the size of an average American 2-car garage can be sufficient for growing rice to feed one's family.

Bangladesh sits on fertile delta soil at the mouth of the Meghna, Padma, Ganges, and over 700 other rivers that empty into the Bay of Bengal. Melting snow in the Himalayas and rains during monsoon season swell the rivers annually, moving fresh earth into the delta and renewing the soil via siltation. Houses and fields are swallowed up during any given year, disappearing under the rivers. Houses can be rebuilt, but cropland is a precious resource that can be completely lost under the river forever. The physical landscape of Bangladesh is always changing and shifting with the rivers.

Recently the social landscape is rapidly changing. Family size has shrunk tremendously over the last forty years from approximately 7 children per woman to the current average of 2.7 children per woman (Rahman et. al., 2010). Bangladeshis (even those in remote rural areas) are increasingly tied to global economic markets – a fact reflected strongly in how they discuss the tension between current wages and increasing prices. Economic development in Bangladesh is marked by large waves of labor out-migration of young men to countries like Malaysia, UAE, and Saudi Arabia.

Primary education is more accessible now than in the past through both secular schools and madrasas. The payoff of education is difficult to realize, however, because the emerging labor market offers large numbers of jobs that require very little formal education. Some of the best paying jobs available to men in rural Bangladesh require only five years of schooling and a willingness to live in another

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country for a long period of time.

This willingness is not in short supply, as evidenced by the way people hold in high esteem those who work abroad. Women often tell me that men who work abroad make good husbands because they send a lot of money home for their wives. The most common question I am asked in Bangladesh is this: 'What is your country?' When I tell them I am from 'America,' men and women usually ask if they can come to America with me when I return. They want a job and they have heard that Americans are rich people with very high incomes.⁴

Labor migration profoundly affects women, who either migrate with their husbands or, more often, are left to manage the household while their husbands are gone for months or years at a time. I have become close to some of our neighbors – a mother and her three daughters. The mother and father have been married for 21 years, while the father has been working in Saudi Arabia for 28 years. The mother's parents probably chose him as a good groom for their daughter because he works abroad and can provide a good, steady income for his family. He sends money home monthly⁵ and returns to Bangladesh every three years to visit. His three girls miss him terribly but they accept that their father is away because he is working hard and sacrificing to provide for them. This sentiment is not uncommon: a good man provides money for his wife, children, and sometimes his parents; therefore, he is excused from other kinds of care-giving and family responsibilities. As more men migrate out of Bangladesh for work, the expectations of men's roles, such as those of 'son,' 'father,' and 'husband,' are shifting to match the trend. Likewise, I believe the expectations placed upon women's roles are also shifting to accommodate the absence of men.

Mesmerized by all of the daughters I have come to know during my time in Bangladesh, my attention has been drawn to family structure and the question of what it means to be a daughter in South Asia. The three neighbor girls I have come to know and the three girls who watched me in the *bari* today: What will it mean for them to be the next generation of wives and adult daughters in Bangladesh?

Son Preference and Daughter Devaluation

Preference for a son is a long-standing, well-documented

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norm in South and Southeast Asia (Chowdhury, 1990; Das Gupta, 2003; Das Gupta, 2007; Diamond, 2008; Guilmoto, 2009; Nie, 2009). Male child preference (Chowdhury, 1990) is evidenced by fertility patterns and skewed sex-ratios of live births. The preference for giving birth to a male child is attributed to a long history in South Asia of family systems that are structured in a way that leads to devaluation of daughters and reliance on sons.

In their comparative study of South and Southeast Asian countries, Das Gupta et al. (2003) have shown that son preference exists across differences in religion, economic development, levels of urbanization, presence or absence of dowry, or the existence of policies that restrict fertility. The common thread, they argue, is the nature of kinship ties and family structures.

Family structure in South Asia is intertwined with economic structures and cultural norms. As I mentioned before, sons will grow up and remain in their parent's household as income-earning adults while daughters will be married and will move away to live with their husband's family. Furthermore, sons with good jobs, good reputations, and a decent education will attract better brides, thus providing the family with good daughters-in-law. While parents want to marry their daughters away into good families, the effects of exactly who a daughter marries does not hit as close to home, so to speak, as the effects of which brides parents choose for their sons to marry.

Writing twenty years ago about the study area where I am currently working, Chowdhury et al suggest a specific cause-effect relationship between fertility and gender preference:

Other things equal, the higher the preference for one sex over the other, the higher the average family size...In settings like Matlab where desire for sons is strong and dominates economic considerations, a program to promote egalitarian attitudes toward children of both sexes might lead to lower fertility.

(Chowdhury et al., 1990: 749-750)

Current evidence from our study does not support Chowdhury's predictions. Equality in the treatment of sons and daughters has a more nuanced explanation and cannot be attributed to any straightforward campaign for equality in order to decrease family size. Rather, it ap-

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pears that things are happening in the reverse order, i.e. a decrease in family size came first, followed by a higher valuation of daughters. The question then becomes twofold: Why is family size decreasing and why does that decrease result in higher valuation of daughters in Bangladesh?

Economic Development and Child Gender Preference

The first question – why is family size decreasing – is outside of the scope of my present project.⁶ However, it is clear that fertility is declining quite rapidly even though smaller family size is at odds with traditional family structuring in Bangladesh. During ethnographic interviews, women often discuss the changing economic structure as a major reason life is easier if one has fewer children. Respondents see the current economic situation as better than in the past because there are more opportunities for people to earn income. Respondents also articulate that prices for things are higher than in the past, and the increase in prices is not always mitigated by the wage increase.

The second question – why does smaller family size result in a higher valuation of daughters – piques my interest the most. In places where the cultural norm is son preference, fertility decline has been shown to intensify that preference. Usually parents become very selective about having sons and favoring them. Daughters are devalued to the point of selective abortion and neglect. One recent example of this is China (Nie, 2009). However, in Matlab, despite many things, we are seeing the opposite: daughters are being valued more highly now. What is different about Bangladesh that is causing the reverse reaction? Could the mitigating factor be labor migration?

Das Gupta et al. (2007) found that the social norm in South Korea is shifting away from son preference *despite* government policies that overtly privilege men and marginalize women. Their findings suggest that industrialization, development, and overall economic change may be the actual driver of decreases in son preference. Furthermore, the authors point out that governments and markets will ‘use’ women to fill low-skilled positions and boost economic development without much cost.

Promoting gender equality can be a tricky thing, particularly in rural Bangladesh. Family size is shrinking alongside a labor market that takes sons abroad for work, all of which occurs within a cultural

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context where female claustration or purdah are used for signaling social status. It is true that more women are participating in the labor market and earning wages than in the past, but this increase is only visible in a small portion of the population. Instead, women may be boosting economic development by shouldering an increasing share of the social and familial burden back home. Women's and men's familial roles are changing in a manner that shifts contact-dependent responsibilities away from men and toward women. In effect, women are buffering the effects of labor migration on the family and local community.

Regardless of intentions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as well as government ministries pushing a low-fertility agenda in Bangladesh know little of the consequences of said agenda in terms of everyday life. NGOs and government agencies are ignorant of the effects their efforts have on family structure. They make concurrent claims about increasing gender equality in Bangladesh while pressuring women to have fewer children, which is, in effect, pressure to behave in a manner that runs counter to accepted cultural and strict religious norms. As family size decreases, culturally-bound familial roles that serve to sustain and manage families become strained. Families in South Asia are structured in a manner that depends on large numbers of sons and daughters; the roles of each serve specific purposes in maintaining and sustaining families. Under current norms, reciprocity in terms of financial and care-giving responsibilities is balanced between natal and marital households as well as between parental and child generations. In other words, family responsibilities are divided between sons and daughters in a specific way that not only works to sustain families, but spreads the responsibility in a manner that distributes it across gender in a somewhat equal fashion.

Efforts to 'develop' Bangladesh economically and lower fertility rates affect gender norms, but this is not the same as achieving equality. Any notion that changing labor patterns signal gender equality is likely to stem from a Western sense of equality, agency, and ability to narrate one's own identity based on education and career. It would be terribly myopic to tout development as a driving force of gender equality without problematizing the fact that equality in my culture may have nothing to do with how equality looks or feels to the women I have spoken to. I don't want to begin by asking whether

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economic development opens up space for gender parity. Instead, as economic structures shift and families react, I want to ask: Are daughters somehow 'buffering' the loss of sons to jobs abroad?

What respondents are saying

Viewing education as important for both boys and girls makes sense in an economy where both men and women are compelled to work because the nature of the market has changed and prices are high. As land disappears under bodies of water or is divided into tiny plots due to inheritance patterns, families are less self-reliant and must participate in the new economic structure. As one respondent put it,

It is more difficult to make a living now than when I was growing up. Because when I was growing up we had fish in the pond and we produced all the vegetable. And all the daily necessary things were very cheap then. But now the price of all things is increasing. We bought an egg at 80 poisha but now it is 7 taka. And we have to buy everything.

Some respondents tell us that the economic situation in their family is better because multiple family members are now working. We asked respondents whether their economic situation has changed and what they think caused this change. One woman told us, 'It is good now... Both my father and brother are working. I am also contributing to the family expenditure. But earlier my father was the only earning person, my brother and I were studying.'

Women working outside their *bari* is gaining cultural acceptance, which is reflected in statements like this one: 'I think boys and girls should receive equal education. Because if we give a girl proper education she can get a job easily and can help her parents or her husband.' But the question remains: To what extent do we actually see women working in rural Bangladesh/the Matlab area? Some are working, yes; however, I would not be surprised to find a 'lag' between acceptance and practice here. The question is certainly worth further inquiry.

When we asked how many children someone should have, this respondent told us, 'I think one should be a girl and one should

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be a boy. If there is a girl, she is more attached with us emotionally. After our death she will be crying for us and also praying for us, but a boy will never do this. A boy can earn money and take care of us that way.' Echoing this sentiment, a woman who is an only child comments on her atypical living arrangement: 'I live in my fathers *bari*' (even though I am married). I am the only child of my parents so my father wanted a *goor jami* (matrilocal residence) for me. After my marriage my husband shifted here permanently. But sometimes I go to my father-in-law's house for a few days to visit them.'

Some young respondents even indicate a preference for girls over boys. This preference is often couched in terms of reciprocity: having girls is good because they will grow up and help take care of their parents. As one woman told us, 'Now a day it is better to have only girls. From my experience my sisters are doing much for our parents compared to my brothers. He who has no daughter is the unhappy person in the world. Daughters are good in every ways.'

Use of words like 'now' and 'now a days' indicates that people know things are changing and that ideas about what daughters and women can achieve are shifting: 'Now girls have service and they take care of their parents but boys do not do that for their parents. So girls should receive more education. Girls can understand parents.' In another interview, we asked a woman, 'What do you think: boys should receive more education or girls?' She told us, 'Both boys and girls should receive the same level of education...Girls can take care of their parents and now they can establish themselves by education.'

Conclusion

Our respondents make a very clear point: The expanding global labor market has profoundly affected people's lives in rural Bangladesh. The women we spoke to explicitly and implicitly connect changing economic circumstances and rapidly-changing local practices, including residence and marriage practices, investment in education, and expectations for their sons and daughters. Globalized capitalism and the disparate development of Asian countries position Bangladesh as a nation of proletariats who must travel to find work in more developed nations within South Asia and further abroad. Researchers at the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies estimate that 5.39 million Bangladeshis are currently working abroad (Asfar,

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2009). The effects of this massive labor out-migration on family and gender roles are not thoroughly documented, though my preliminary data indicate that these effects may be significant. Today's daughters in Bangladesh are coming of age in a world very different from the one their mothers and grandmothers experienced.

It is imperative for the future of women in developing countries that we understand how changing labor and economic relations interact with global gender inequalities. Further research must be done to critically analyze the relationship between globalized capitalism and women's social position and autonomy. Such analyses are necessary in order to work toward sensible solutions to problems of social injustice and inequality in developing countries. Globalization and development do not affect people in a monolithic or entirely negative way. NGOs often have the best of intentions, but without input from the researchers who take time to consider local women's lived experience, NGO efforts may be misdirected. More localized, in-depth research is necessary to elucidate the complex relationship between economic and social change. Calls to reign in development and global capitalism may be too little and too late; therefore, we must now try to understand the variation in effects of global capitalism and pay close attention to the times and places where these effects may be positive. I believe it is important to ask: What effects do global labor markets have on the women left to sustain the social order at home? In what places and instances do globalization and economic development have a positive effect on women? Only after learning about these spaces can we know whether the positive effects can be replicated elsewhere. By studying the complex relationship between economic development, the labor market, and family/gender relations in Bangladesh, I believe we critically examine the constant forces of oppression and resistance in women's lives.

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Endnotes

1. A bari is a cluster of houses that share a common yard and usually a kitchen. In rural Bangladesh where residence patterns are patrilocal, boys and girls grow up living in their father's house with their mother and their paternal relatives around them in the bari. After marriage, sons stay with their wives within their father's bari while daughters marry out and move to their husband's family's bari.
2. Families with lower socioeconomic status in South Asia, including families in Bangladesh, signal social status through female claustration or purdah. Having female family members who do not work outside of the bari signals that the extra income they could provide is not necessary and that their modesty and safety remain intact and guarded by their family members.
3. Hindu customs prevent daughters from inheriting land. When we asked some respondents whether their parents gave them any land, they simply replied, "No. We are Hindu."
4. Occasionally a mother will ask if I can take her son or daughter to America with me when I go home. I can usually sidestep this request by telling them that I am a student so I do not have a good job or money to bring anyone to America.
5. Even in the smaller towns of Bangladesh where no ATM, no bank, and no restaurants exist, I have discovered that one can always, without fail, locate a Western Union office.

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6. Anthropologists, demographers, and other skilled researchers (including some very talented people on our research team) are taking a long, hard look at exactly why family size decreases in the face of economic change and industrialization.

Roslyn S. Fraser is a graduate student in Sociology at the University of Missouri. She is currently working on her doctoral dissertation “From Missing Daughters to Missing Sons?” Her research takes place in rural Bangladesh, where she will spend a total of ten months in the field over a two-year period.

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