"Daughters are good in every way:" The global labor market and changing child gender preference in rural Bangladesh.

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Introduction

Twenty-five years ago, predictions about the future of women in rural Bangladesh were dire. Overt son preference meant daughters were devalued to the point of sex-selective abortion, neglect, or abuse (Chen et al 1981). Meanwhile, wives were beaten to death over dowry disputes (Shamim 1986), and women's mortality rates were abnormally high relative to other parts of the world (D'Souza 1980). Comparing them to their urban counterparts, researchers expected rural Bangladeshi women to remain the subordinate dependents of men because they have fewer opportunities for change, limited access to education, and little access to wage labor (Dil 1985). Considering academic and popular media accounts of Bangladesh, one might be surprised to learn that a handful of research has emerged to suggest life is improving for women in Bangladesh (e.g. Ahmed et al. 2004). These changes appeared to be related to the increasing integration of Bangladeshi villages into global labor markets and male labor migration, but the details of this relationship were unclear. Some current research shows daughter valuation is increasing in Bangladesh, but these studies are limited to statistical analyses of sex ratios at birth or interviews of working women in urban Bangladesh.

In order to close the knowledge gap left by existing studies, this project sought to answer the following research questions: Are daughters also valued more highly in rural areas

despite rigid adherence to traditional practices such as purdah[1], which limits women's economic contributions because it denies them access to outside work? To what extent are women in rural areas expressing attitudes and behaviors that challenge son preference and other patriarchal norms? And are changing ideas of daughters related to the recent upsurge in male labor out-migration? Our data show that daughters in Bangladesh are becoming more highly valued because sons are increasingly gone and are viewed as less reliable sources of social and economic security.

Although son preference remains common, our interview data show that daughters are becoming more highly valued as family size decreases—and in some families appear to be valued more highly than sons, who are perceived as less reliable. More telling, some families are eschewing the dominant practice of patrilocal[2] residence to allow women to stay with their natal families after marriage. In contrast to traditional practice, it is now common that parents expect their female children to maintain ties with the natal family and continue to provide social support, which is evidenced by how parents talk about their daughters and sons. Changes in the gendered role of "daughter" may mean that daughters' work is increasing in order to buffer social losses related to labor migration of sons.

This paper will examine changed expectations around women's familial roles in rural Bangladesh, especially the role of daughter. Understanding why and how familial roles change during economic development in Bangladesh is meaningful transnationally as several of the elements that exist in rural Bangladesh are common in other parts of the world as well. These include son preference, a male-dominated labor market, rapid urbanization, and large-scale rural-to-urban labor migration. Thus the dynamics we observe here may have implications for other cultures globally.

[1] *Purdah*, also referred to as the veil or curtain, is the practice of female claustration. It is believed that veiling women from public space protects them from the male gaze and threats to their purity. Bangladeshi families with lower socioeconomic standing signal higher social status through *purdah*. Preventing female family members from performing work outside of the home 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.

[2] Patrilocal residence means children grow up in their father's house with their mother and their paternal relatives around them. After marriage, sons stay with their wives in their father's house while daughters marry out and move to their husband's family's house.

Background

Son preference is a long-standing, well-documented cultural practice in South and East Asia (Chowdhury 1990, Das Gupta 2003 and 2007, Diamond Smith 2008, Guilmoto 2009, Nie 2009). The preference for male children is attributed to a long history in South Asia of patrilineal, patrilocal family systems that rely on sons to inherit and support the family economically while daughters are married out (Das Gupta 2003). In places where the cultural norm is son preference, fertility decline has been shown to intensify that preference (Giulmoto 2009, Nie 2009, Sekher et al. 2010). When parents are motivated to have fewer children, they tend to become more selective about having sons and favoring them in practice. Daughters can sometimes be devalued to the point of selective abortion and neglect. The best known example of this is the highly skewed sex-ratios at birth in China that emerged after implementation of the one-child policy (Nie 2009), but the phenomenon of intensified son preference has also been clearly documented in South Asia (e.g. Diamond Smith 2008, Gill 2009). Conversely, in rural Bangladesh, fertility decline appears to have had the opposite effect: son preference is declining as fertility rates fall. Present research that shows daughter valuation is increasing is limited to statistical analyses of sex ratios at birth or studies of working women in urban Bangladesh. Our qualitative data show that rural families are also beginning to value daughters more highly despite sharp decreases in family size, the presence of dowry and dowry inflation, and the continuing practice of female claustration which, in effect, prevents women from working outside of their extended families. Although a preference for sons remains common, our qualitative interview data suggest that daughters are becoming more highly valued even as family size decreases. Some families appear to value daughters more highly than sons, who are increasingly perceived as less reliable sources of economic and social stability than in the past.

Over the last four decades, rural Bangladesh has been the site of both dramatic fertility decline and increasingly rapid economic change. One of the most striking aspects of these changes has been the large waves of male out-migration to Dhaka, the capital city, and abroad. Researchers at the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies estimate that 5.39 million Bangladeshis currently are working abroad (Asfar 2009). They also estimate that in 2007 alone a staggering 830,000 Bangladeshis, or 2% of the nation's total labor force, left Bangladesh for

work abroad (Asfar 2009). The effects of these changes on family and gender roles are not thoroughly documented, though our data indicate that these effects may be both profound and unexpected. The traditional roles and responsibilities of daughters in rural Bangladesh appear to be changing – even expanding—as a reaction to men leaving to participate in global labor markets.

In their study, Chowdhury et al (1990) propose a specific cause-effect relationship in which son preference was linked to economic motivations, and decreased son preference could lead to fertility decline. Preliminary evidence from our study indicates the relationship is more nuanced; it appears that a decrease in family size has preceded and perhaps partially caused a higher valuation of daughters.

We find that this reorientation of the preference for daughters over sons is strongly related to economic considerations, rather than opposed by them. These ideas are echoed in other works that suggest fertility decline may be better understood as a function of the costs and benefits of raising children (e.g. Becker 1991, Kaplan 1994, Kress 2008). This article will draw on this perspective, including the benefits to parents of investing in daughters in the context of intensifying labor migration of sons.

Other recent research has linked increased valuation of daughters to economic change. Das Gupta et al. found that the social norm in South Korea is shifting away from son preference despite government policies that overtly privilege men and marginalize women (2007). Their findings suggest that economic changes, including industrialization and labor market participation of women, may be the main drivers of decreases in son preference. Although the majority of women in rural Bangladesh are not participating directly in the labor market, they are still profoundly affected by labor-related economic change. Women, as both daughters and wives, may be boosting economic development by shouldering an increasing share of the social and familial burden at home while men are migrating to cities and abroad for better paying jobs. 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 may be buffering the effects of labor migration on the family and local community.

Dannecker (2005) suggests that changing gender roles in Bangladesh are linked directly to the increasing number of Bangladeshi women who migrate as temporary workers abroad. She argues that transnational spaces are masculine and that gender norms are shifting as more women move into the masculine realm of labor migration. Dannecker calls the presence of women in transnational labor markets the agent for change in gender relations back home (2005). We argue that the phenomenon of women entering the global labor market is only one piece of the puzzle: gender relations are shifting in parts of Bangladesh, including our study site, where very few women are labor migrants and the overwhelming majority of women do not participate in labor outside of the home. Dannecker's conclusions do not account for the kinds of responsibilities men have toward their families. When men out-migrate, other family members must take on the responsibilities left by their absence. I We hypothesize that female family members are being valued more highly now than in the past because they are taking over the responsibilities vacated by their brothers and husbands who have left the village for work. Additionally, as an increasing number of daughters take on duties once held by their brothers, a shift in gender norms occurs. Women enter space that is traditionally male-dominated simply by shopping in market places and doing business in public offices. Out of necessity, families accept that female members of the household must enter public space locally – no travel abroad or labor migration on the part of the women is necessary for this change to occur.

Study Setting and Population

The study site for this research is Matlab, Bangladesh. Matlab is a rural area where traditional cultural practices have been maintained in the face of rapid economic change, large waves of male out-migration for work, and decreasing family size. It is characterized by a Muslim religious majority, a tangible presence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), increasing access to education for boys and girls, high population density, and a recent sharp decline in fertility.

The Matlab area is representative of Bangladesh as a whole. Most people in the area participate in agriculture, though many own no land themselves (Rahman et al. 1992). Opportunities for earning income in the area include agriculture, day labor, and handicraft

production; however, these opportunities are mainly reserved for men because women are expected to stay home and work domestically. Households are comprised of an extended family; groups of patrilineally-related families typically live near each other in a group called a bari. Most marriages are arranged by the bride's and groom's parents after they negotiate a dowry. The area is socially and geographically isolated from urban centers, particularly during monsoon season when boat travel becomes the primary means of transportation (Rahman et al. 1992).

Despite the fact that family size in Matlab has shrunk significantly over the last 40 years—from approximately 7 children per woman to the current average of 2.7 children per woman (Rahman et al 2010); however, severe population pressures and resource competition remain. Subsistence agriculture and fishing are the primary economic activities of most families in the region, meaning land rights and land inheritance are limiting factors on household production and economic success.. Families divide their land among their sons and, occasionally, their daughters. This practice leads to ever decreasing plot sizes, commonly leading to land disputes between family members (Zaman 2005).

Local marketplaces across Bangladesh are increasingly tied to global material markets that bring an influx of cheap, imported goods and marginalize local producers. The global labor market has also reached rural Bangladesh as young men are leaving for work because subsistence agriculture is becoming a less reliable means to achieve economic and food security. Consequently, economic development in Bangladesh is marked by enormous waves of labor out-migration of young men to urban centers in Bangladesh and to countries like Malaysia, the United Arab Emirates, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Rahman et al 2010). Although the garment industry has significantly increased the number of jobs available to women in Dhaka, the impact of the garment industry is not a major factor in Matlab because women are not leaving the villages in that region for garment factory work.

While primary education is more accessible now than in the past, the economic and social benefits of education are undermined because the predominant jobs in the emerging labor market do not require formal education skills beyond the primary level. In fact, some of the best paying jobs available to men require just five years of school and a willingness to live in

Dhaka or abroad. There is evidence that education is actually decreasing in importance with respect to the labor market: data from the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies indicate that the level of education for male migrants is decreasing, and has fallen from an average of 7.2 years of education in 2000 to 5.3 years of education in 2009 (Asfar 2009). Availability of jobs for women is increasing, but women in Matlab are not entering the labor market en masse, probably due to cultural norms of female claustration, or *purdah*, and a cultural emphasis on the importance of women's involvement in the rearing of children. Government campaigns to promote educating girls appear to have had some success (Asadullah and Chaudhury 2009), but it is unclear whether educating girls will eventually lead to more women in the labor force.

Families in South Asia are structured such that sons and daughters have separate roles that serve distinct purposes in maintaining and perpetuating families. Under current norms, reciprocity exists in terms of financial and care-giving responsibilities exchanged between natal and marital households, parent and child generations, and sons and daughters. Public space is masculine space, while private, domestic space is both feminine and masculine. Men are responsible for the economic security of the family while women are responsible for maintaining daily domestic routines. Women devote a large amount of their time and energy to preparing meals for everyone in the bari. Women also participate in agricultural labor on family land, care for children, and attend to elderly relatives. Because public space is masculine space, men are responsible for all shopping, including food, clothing, medicine, and household items. Men are in charge of extra-familiar transactions such as buying and selling land or working others' land for payment in crops or wages. Arranging the details of funerals and weddings also falls within men's domain. Men who have sisters travel often to keep in touch with their sisters and her children. Uncles play an important role in the lives of their sisters' children; they are the benefactors of their nieces' and nephews' important life events, including their education and weddings. Because of the economic and social support he provides, it is always a happy event when the maternal uncle (called the Mama) comes to visit.

Methods

Data for this paper come from 46 ethnographic interviews with women in Matlab during the spring and summer of 2010. Interviews included questions about ideal family size, education, child sex and gender preference, occupation, migration, marriage, economic conditions, contraception, exposure to media, and changing social norms.

Qualitative interview data are particularly appropriate for examining issues of gender preference because they allow a nuanced examination of social attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs. Such methods have the potential to detect important changes in social norms and values before those changes may be evident to quantitative, outcome-focused models. Though our qualitative data were collected at one point in time, we spoke to women of many ages (20-64 years) and asked them to compare the economic and social situation of their own childhood to the changes that have taken place after their marriages and while they were engaged in child-rearing. Our data thus allow us to see social change occurring in families over a 60-year time period as experienced by women of different ages and social statuses.

In order to understand why and how the role of daughter in rural Bangladesh is changing, we focused on how respondents talk about their sons versus their daughters and what they believe are appropriate practices for caring for and investing in sons and daughters. Analyses are based on a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss 1967) to understanding the themes that emerge from transcripts of qualitative interviews. While analyzing transcripts, we paid particular attention to how respondents, who are both mothers and daughters themselves, discuss the following: their expectations and observations regarding the social roles of daughters and sons; their beliefs about the educational needs of boys and girls; their attitudes toward gender and the labor market; their beliefs about marriage and dowry practices; their ideas about labor migration and social consequences of migration; and their intentions or responsibilities towards their own parents and other kin.

Results

Our findings suggest that traditional familial roles that sustain families are quickly changing as family size decreases and migration influenced economic change continues to alter

intra-household relationships. People appear to adjust to these changes in part by altering their expectations for sons and daughters, as evidenced in the way respondents talk about family size, education, care-giving, marriage, and labor. This change is exemplified by the following quote, "[b]oys and girls should receive the same education. Now girls have more opportunity everywhere, to get jobs and education than boys. Girls can do the same as boys can. Having the same education, girls can get a job teaching primary school but boys cannot." Here the respondent indentifies that boys and girls should receive the same education because girls can now legally work and receive education. Furthermore, the respondent indicates that she believes girls are now the primary school teachers, an occupation no longer open to young men.

At the same time, respondents believe that the ideal family size should be between 2 and 3 children. This ideal is summarized by the following responses to the question "Please tell me what is a good number of children a person should have?"

> "I think one should be boy and one should girl. If I have small family then it will be easy to take care of them and look beautiful for having 2 children"
>
> "Everyone says that 2 children are good for a family. But I think 2 or 3 children are good for today's life. Because if I have 2 or three children I can give them enough food and cloth and education and make them prefect human (Bangla: manush kora)"
>
> "Everyone says that 2 children are good for the family and I also think so. Because a person needs money to give their children proper education, food and all the necessary things in their life. If there are fewer children than the cost will be fewer and if the person is not so rich then 2 children are enough for the family."

These responses are typical and contain an interesting theme. In most of the replies to this question, respondents would qualify their answers with "everyone says" or some variation on that idea. That is, the women we interviewed would make reference to what they believed was an emerging social norm of 2 or 3 children as the proper family size. A few respondents believed that 4 children is the correct family size; however, no one responded with more than

4, and only one respondent indicated a family size of 1 child was ideal. The following is typical of the 4 children as the ideal:

> "Two are son and 2 are daughter are the best number of the children. Because one son and one daughter are not safe. If one dies, then what should a person do? If someone has 2 daughters and 2 sons and if anyone dies then you already have to have some other children."

The majority of statements about preferences for sons or daughters are made when we ask respondents about educating their children. Twenty-seven out of 46 respondents believe girls should have at least as much education as boys. Respondents' reasons for parity in education do not appear to stem primarily from government education campaigns or ideologies of equality: rather, their justifications for educating girls are usually couched in terms of practical and culturally normative motivations including improving a daughter's chances in the marriage market, giving her knowledge that she can pass on to her children, and increasing the possibility that she can participate in the labor market especially if she is widowed or abandoned by her husband. These sorts of reasons are captured in the following responses to our questions.

> "I think boys and girls both should receive equal education. Because both boys and girls have same rights. One girl can get a job after finishing her study as boy."

> "I think they should receive the same education. Those who have the ability can give them same education. Both boys and girls can do the same job if they have the same higher education. Some thinks that girls will get married and will live with her husband so they need not to study more."

> "I think boys and girls should receive equal level of education. Because both have same rights. Besides if girls are not educated enough then she has no value in the society. So both boys and girls should receive equal level of education."

> "Both boys and girls should receive the same level of education. Now we can't say what is written on our fate. Now adult men are dying more than women. When the husbands died in earlier, the wives have to run the family with her children. So they need education for a job. Even if girls have good education people respect them more."

However, not all respondents believed that girls and boys should receive equal education. For twelve women, boys were seen as needing more education than girls. The central theme for this belief is that boys have a higher potential in the job market and education will provide them with the needed background to gain employment. The following summarizes this view.

> "Boys should receive more education than girls. If they have good education they may have good job. Boys can earn money and can support their parents. Boys try to support the family before they get married (after married they have their own family). But girls go to husband's bari and there is no benefit for girls."

For six women in our sample, girls were believed to be more important in terms of education than boys. These women stated that girls were more stable and would be better providers for elder care than boys. These respondents also talked with more certainty regarding education for girls than those who expressed a belief in equal education. These ideas can be seen in the following responses.

> "Girls should receive more education than the boys. Because after finishing education girls can get a job and can help the parents. But boys are going away after their marriage. So girl should receive more education."

> "Girls should receive more education. 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."

> "Now a day it is better to have only girls. From her experience her sisters are doing much for their parents than her brothers. He who has no daughter is the unhappy person in the world. Daughters are good in every way."

Our findings also show that age at marriage is increasing for girls, in part because parents want to educate their daughters and maximize their chances for marrying a "well-earning" groom from an economically sound family. Respondents indicate a strong preference for grooms with good jobs, especially jobs in Dhaka (the capital city) or abroad. Parents are willing to pay the higher dowries commanded by labor migrant grooms because they offer

economic stability and upward mobility for their daughters and grandchildren. Yet labor migration by definition means that men (both sons and husbands) are absent from the local community; in fact, when grooms are abroad it has become increasingly common for brides to continue to live with their own parents after marriage rather than to move to the groom's house—an extreme break with the cultural tradition of patrilocality in this region. This change has the potential to create and maintain long-term social ties between daughters and their natal families, ties which were traditionally of more limited importance.

Discussion

The qualitative data collected and presented in this paper supports the idea that girls are becoming more valued culturally. Twenty-seven of the 46 women we interviewed generally felt that girls should be given the same educational opportunities as boys. What is interesting, however, is that the expected work of girls and boys remains significantly different. According to our respondents, boys should be educated to obtain jobs in Dhaka, and internationally. The reasoning is that boys need to have high levels of education to secure these jobs. With such employment, boys can then send remittances back to their natal households. Alternatively, the expected occupations for girls, with the same educational investments, are teacher and other occupations that can be practiced within Matlab itself. Thus, even though there is a cultural shift to valuing education equally for girls and boys, it is still expected that girls will remain near their husband's bari. This sentiment is summed up in the following quote:

56 year old mother of five:

> "I want my son go to abroad and do some work there and send me lots of money. Because working in abroad people can earn lots of money and by that money I can build brick build home and wear gold. But working in home people cannot earn enough money and it is also very hard to work in the country. I want my daughter get a government job or doing teaching. Doing this type of job she can help me by giving me some money and also help her husband."

An examination of the ages of our respondents and their gender preferences for education produced interesting results. Women who expressed a desire for educating boys and girls equally had an average year of birth (YOB) of 1972, while those that expressed boys should

receive more education had a YOB of 1966, and those that expressed girls should have more education had a YOB of 1965. This result is somewhat counter to our prediction that the women who value educating girls over boys or value educational parity will be younger, while older women would harbor the more traditional boy investment belief. However, average YOBs are not statistically stable in such a small sample size. What can be gleaned from the numerical data is that younger women tend to view boys and girls more equally and the respondents who express any specific gender preference tend to be somewhat older. We believe this provides moderate support for our hypothesis that recent out-migration of young men has created a cultural shift in how girls are valued. Our data show that the majority of our respondents (34 out of 46) believe that girls should have at least equal, if not more, education than boys.

We believe this change is out of necessity, as fewer and fewer young men stay in their natal baris. As men leave, women are left to perform traditional male duties. In our data, only 4 of 46 households did not have an immediate family member who had migrated to either Dhaka or internationally. Thus, out-migration is ubiquitous and appears to be associated with changes in cultural beliefs about the ideal roles for men and women. This is not to suggest that out-migration is the only factor contributing to this shift; indeed, laws removing barriers to girls' education, media campaigns, and exposure to Western aid workers all probably have played a role in the cultural shift. However, our contention is that out-migration has created an ecological need for girls to begin filling traditional male roles. At the same time, with the loss of men in the local market place, women also have increasing opportunities to open businesses. The last factor we have observed was the use of the Community Health Worker by ICDDR,B. These women were hired and trained by ICDDR,B since the early 1970s. They have gone from community to community providing health and family planning services, conducted surveys, and participated in numerous health interventions. These women became the template for the belief that girls can use education to gain income for their families.

In summary, many cultural changes are the result of new ideas being presented to a local community; however, those ideas are only adopted when the socio-ecological or socioeconomic conditions provide a niche for the ideas to take hold (Ensminger and Knight 1997, Danneker 2005). In Bangladesh there are significant economic pressures for individuals to

find income wherever they can due to endemic poverty and the lack of employment opportunities. Ecologically, the nation is significantly stressed. Population densities are over 1,000 people per square kilometer (PRB 2010). These factors make the population especially vulnerable to any economic, environmental, and/or global disturbances. Given these twin conditions of poor economic opportunity and low ecological tolerance, it is not surprising that men are migrating out of the country at high rates. By going overseas men can garner significantly higher wages and enjoy a higher standard of living. At the same time, these out-migrating men leave family roles unfulfilled. This opens an ecological niche, which women are now beginning to fill. Thus, the equal valuing of girls may have been a goal of several governmental initiatives, it wasn't until economic forces changed the family ecology that we begin to see a cultural shift at the local level.

Conclusion

These findings lead us to believe that changing social roles in rural Bangladesh are linked to both economic development and fertility decline in ways that are likely to be perpetuated over time. While economic development does not necessarily lead to gender equality, changes in family relationships and gender roles can have profound, far-reaching social consequences. Such changes have the potential to create social space for increased gender equality if social conditions are favorable and social policies are implemented wisely. We believe that exploring these social changes as they emerge will be fruitful for increasing our understanding of the relationship between fertility decline and gender equality. Understanding why and how familial roles change during economic development in Bangladesh is useful transnationally because many of the elements that exist in rural Bangladesh are common in other parts of the world, including son preference, a male-dominated labor market, rapid urbanization, and large-scale rural-to-urban migration.

This paper, however, only begins to unravel the factors involved in changing how girls are viewed in Bangladesh; more work needs to be conducted with men and how they support their daughters' educational investments. Along those lines, work should be conducted with

migrants to see if living abroad has contributed to the cultural shift. Lastly, work should be conducted within the baris themselves to understand how male absence changes the household ecology. Through these lines of investigation we will be able to develop a deeper understanding of the factors involved in cultural change in general, and in the valuation of girls in the particular.

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. Critical analyses of the relationship between globalized capitalism and women's social position and autonomy 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. 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. It is important to ask: In what places and instances does development have a positive effect on women? Only after learning about these spaces can we know whether the positive effects can be replicated elsewhere.

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