

Women's Empowerment across Generations in Bangladesh: Influences on the Timing of Marriage and Childbearing

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Abstract

Statistical analyses from surveys completed in 1994 and 2002 in six villages of rural Bangladesh failed to support the hypothesis that daughters and daughters-in-law of empowered women would marry and begin childbearing later than others. The present study uses qualitative data to: explore the socio-cultural processes through which women influence two proximate determinants of health and well-being -- age at marriage and age at initiation of childbearing -- in the next generation; and investigate whether, and how, institutions and processes resistant to change may be undermining women's empowerment and its transmission and effects across generations. Open-ended, in-depth interviews were conducted with triads of women -- young married women, their mothers, and their mothers-in-law. The findings suggest that poverty and vulnerability to economic crisis are persistent constraints to later marriage and childbearing even in families of empowered women who are aware of the risks and disadvantages of early marriage and childbearing.

Introduction

The empowerment of women has been widely acknowledged as an important goal in international health and development. The International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994 and the 1995 Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women underscored the role of women's empowerment in shaping health outcomes and demographic processes. More than a decade has passed since these meetings, during which time theoretical and empirical work on empowerment has expanded and policy interest endured. One of the UN Millennium Development Goals is to "promote gender equality and empower women." Many international bilateral and multilateral donors, such as the World Bank and the United Nations, now include women's empowerment as an element in their health and development strategies. If women's empowerment truly is an important factor with the potential to influence health and social outcomes, then it should be possible to see the effects of empowerment extend over time and resonate across generations, especially within the family – yet few studies have examined this.

Cross-Generational Influences

Women's empowerment in various aspects of life has been documented in Bangladesh and many other countries, but the research literature has largely overlooked the possibility that empowered women may support gender equity and better health among women in the next generation. The exception to this is the literature that looks at cross-generational effects of women's education on health-related behaviors. Bender and McCann (2000) found that mothers' education had a positive effect on daughters' prenatal care and family planning in Bolivia; Bhuyan (1991) found that adoption of family planning increased with the educational level of mothers-in-law in Bangladesh; Maitra (2004) found that mothers' education had an effect on daughters' ages at marriage in Nepal; and Bates et al. (2006) found that women's education influenced the timing of marriage and childbearing in the next generation. Other literature (Govindasamy and Malhotra 1996; Mason 1995) suggests, however, that female education alone may be an insufficient indicator of women's empowerment. In some cases it appears to function as a proxy for socio-economic status of the family and geographic area of residence (Desai and Alva 1998).

The literature from South Asia addressing the role of intergenerational relationships in women's health focuses mainly on the harmful influence of mothers-in-law on the health and well-being of young married women. Mothers-in-law are described as wielding considerable influence over their daughters-in-law in such matters as the timing of first childbirth (Jeffery et al. 1989), use of prenatal care and other health services (Kadir et al. 2003), and subjection to domestic violence (Jeffery et al. 1989). Das Gupta (1996) argues that mothers-in-law in India contribute to the ill health of younger married women by allowing and even demanding their undernourishment and withholding medical care. A quantitative study in Pakistan (Kadir et al. 2003) juxtaposes perspectives of women, sons, and daughters-in-law in decision-making related to health, family planning, and other matters. When the daughter-in-law became ill, all three members of the triad felt she had the least say in deciding what to do. This study did not include senior women's empowerment as a variable.

Conflicting Evidence

In contrast to the scanty research literature on empowerment across generations of women, numerous studies examine the effects of interventions such as education, microcredit, and employment on women's empowerment, and the effects of empowerment on a variety of health and social outcomes for women and their infants and children. The findings from these studies, while generally positive, are somewhat equivocal. The literature on microcredit in Bangladesh, where at least two million women are involved in microcredit programs, is particularly contentious. One body of studies has linked microcredit with outcomes such as women's empowerment (Balk 1997; Hashemi et al. 1996; Kabeer 1998; Mahmud 2000; Mahmud 2003) and contraceptive use (Latif and Khandker 1996; Schuler et al. 1997). Others (mostly qualitative) link microcredit with domestic violence and suggest that women often do not control their loan money but are merely exploited by male family members who want access to the funds (summarized in [Mahmud 2000]). In a review of some of the conflicting literature on microcredit and empowerment in Bangladesh, (Kabeer 1998; Kabeer 2001c) concludes that the benefits from women's empowerment are real but modest. She does not address whether such benefits can extend across generations. Evidence from Bangladesh regarding the empowerment effects of women's employment in the garment industry (Amin et al. 1998; Kabeer 2001b; Kibria 1995) and female education is also mixed. Survey research by (Arends-Kuenning and Amin 2000) and the (World Bank 2003) shows that education has an impact on age at marriage, but the same authors argue based on qualitative evidence that women's education does not have "transformatory significance" in the sense of empowering women to challenge gender inequalities (Arends-Kuenning and Amin 2001).

Measurement issues

The paucity of literature on cross-generational effects of women's empowerment may be partly due to the difficulty of measuring the concept. A recent review (Malhotra and Schuler 2005) concludes that the vast majority of studies do not measure empowerment effectively enough to provide conclusive evidence regarding the factors that empower women, and that they cannot conclusively answer the question of whether the empowerment of women results in positive health and development outcomes. Most

studies reviewed captured only a narrow segment of empowerment; they did not come close to measuring all potentially relevant dimensions, and often additional information would have been needed to understand whether the indicators used did in fact reflect empowerment.

Malhotra and Schuler (2005) also highlighted disjunctions between the conceptual and empirical literature on empowerment. For example, in much of the conceptual literature, empowerment is characterized as the ability to exercise agency (define one's goals and act upon them) by making strategic life choices—decisions that influence a person's life trajectory and subsequent ability to exercise agency and make choices (e.g., [Kabeer 2001a]). Examples would include decisions related to marriage, education, employment, and childbearing. As such choices are relatively infrequent in a person's life, it is often difficult to link them with other variables of interest unless the research time frame is quite long. Most household-level studies therefore use indicators of women's empowerment that reflect what might be termed “empowerment in small matters” (e.g., involvement in day-to-day household decisions) rather than strategic choices, with an implicit assumption that the two are linked. Empirical research provides relatively little evidence that this assumption is valid (Malhotra and Schuler 2005).

Preliminary research

In 2003, we undertook statistical analyses to test the hypothesis that empowerment in one generation of women would have a positive influence on the lives of grown daughters and daughters-in-law, using data from surveys we had carried out in 1994 and 2002 in six villages. The respondents included 876 mother - daughter pairs and 352 mother-in-law - daughter-in-law pairs. The analyses were based on responses to a wide range of questions about women's empowerment in various domains of life that were aggregated into a set of empowerment-related variables. Contrary to expectations, no clear overall pattern emerged from these analyses, although several dimensions of mother's empowerment were associated with a desire to delay the marriages of daughters who were still unmarried, and a few empowerment indicators among mothers-in-law were associated with the daughter-in-law having fewer children (Schuler et al. 2004). In a subsequent analysis, senior women's education was associated with later marriage and

childbearing among daughters and daughters-in-law. Empowerment did not appear to mediate these relationships, although mother's empowerment was independently correlated with later marriage (Bates et al. 2006).

Qualitative data we collected between 2000 and 2005 on a variety of topics (marriage, gender-based violence and early marriage and childbearing) have also yielded contradictory evidence regarding the nature and significance of the empowerment that has taken place in rural Bangladesh. On one hand, we found a widespread perception that women are changing, that they are better educated, better informed, more daring and more resourceful than they used to be. Both men and women explained this phenomenon as a result of exposure to education, mass media, credit programs, employment opportunities and health services (Malhotra and Schuler 2005). On the other hand, individual level data showed that many women continued to transmit gender inequality to the next generation by, for example, marrying off daughters at early ages, and pressuring daughters-in-law to bear children at young ages (Schuler et al. 2006a).

In light of these findings, we undertook a qualitative study to: (1) Re-examine the concept of women's empowerment, and the salience of specific empowerment indicators in a period of normative change; (2) Explore the socio-cultural processes through which women influence two strategic life choices affecting women's health and well-being -- age at marriage and age at initiation of childbearing; and (3) Investigate whether, and how, institutions and processes resistant to change may be undermining women's empowerment and its transmission and effects across generations. This paper presents findings related to objectives (2) and (3). We define women's empowerment as the capacity to exercise agency and make strategic life choices in a context where women's agency is constrained by an inegalitarian gender system.

Early marriage and childbearing in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, marriage is "universal" in that almost everyone marries in his or her lifetime (NIPORT 2007). Supporting this universality is a strong ideology that parents have not fulfilled their roles as parents until they have gotten their daughters married (Chowdhury 2004; Kotalova 1996). This pressure is especially acute for fathers in

relation to daughters, since it is their traditional role to finance their children's marriages—in the case of daughters by providing dowry if it is demanded -- and among the poor it usually is (Bates 2004), though this was not the case a generation ago (Amin and Cain 1997; Huda 2006; Huq and Amin 2001; Schuler et al. 2006a).

Early marriage and childbearing among girls is associated with a wide range of negative social and health consequences for young mothers and their infants and contributes to rapid population growth. Our research site, Bangladesh, is second only to Niger in having the highest percentage of adolescent brides in the world; according to 2004 national survey data, 68% of girls had been married by the time they reached 18 years of age (NIPORT et al. 2005). In 2004, 28% of currently married 15–19-year-old Bangladeshi girls had already had their first child (NIPORT et al. 2001). Female age at first marriage gradually increased between 1989 and 2000, but the 2004 data suggest a stagnation or reversal in this trend (NIPORT et al. 2005). Here we use 18, the legal minimum age at marriage for females in Bangladesh, as a reference point, defining marriages and pregnancies prior to that age as “early.” We also, however, note differences within the category of “early,” because marriages at the age of 13–14 (still quite common) clearly have different implications for most girls than marriages at the age of 17. A recent review of literature concludes that policy makers should be most concerned about marriages and pregnancies under the age of 15 because transitions to adulthood at these ages are “virtually always” problematic, and it is a critical period for developing adolescents’ perceptions of gender roles and sexual attitudes (Dixon-Mueller 2006).

Research Design and Methods

Sites

Rural Bangladesh is a particularly appropriate site for this research in light of the persistence of early marriage and childbearing because interventions potentially contributing to women's empowerment (including microcredit, female education, and community-based health and family planning services) have been underway on a large scale for close to two decades, and because women's empowerment has been documented in various contexts. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, microcredit programs rapidly expanded in rural areas of the country, and many in the development field

believed that they were empowering the women who participated in them. In the health sector, massive efforts were made during the 1980s and 1990s to bring high-impact primary health care interventions to women and children, such as oral rehydration, child immunization, and family planning. Bangladesh is well known in the fields of population and development for its rapid fertility decline from over six to just over three children between the late 1970s and the early 1990s (NIPORT et al. 2001).

The research sites are three villages in Faridpur, Magura, and Rangpur districts where the authors have been conducting research since 1991.¹ Locating the study in longstanding research sites helps us to understand the evolving constellation of opportunities and constraints in the rural Bangladesh environment that influence women's strategies and decisions concerning their daughters and daughters-in-law. Changes since 1991 are likely to have affected both the meaning and measurement of women's empowerment. When we started our research, rural women had few opportunities other than microcredit to generate cash income, rates of illiteracy were extremely high, and women passed their lives mostly within the confines of their homes, with little chance for civic participation and little contact with formal institutions, programs, or services other than door-to-door family planning and primary health care campaigns. Since the early 1990s, the inhabitants of the study villages have been exposed to a wide range of governmental and nongovernmental interventions that have provided resources to women and opportunities for them to expand their skills and knowledge. These interventions have included promotion of girls' education and secondary school stipends for girls, community based health and family planning services and promotion of services outside the home, microcredit and training in skills for income generation, and mass communications on topics related to health, population, political participation and laws and policies aimed at reducing son preference, dowry, early marriage and childbearing, and gender-based discrimination. Employment opportunities have also expanded somewhat. Comparison of our 2002 survey data with rural statistics from the 1999–2000 Demographic and Health

¹ Three out of a total of six villages were included in a recent study on early marriage and childbearing (Schuler et al. 2006a). To gain a broader perspective, we located the present study in the remaining three villages.

Survey suggests that the villages are not atypical in the context of rural Bangladesh (Bates et al. 2004).

Interview samples

Open-ended, in-depth interviews were conducted with triads of women -- young married women, their mothers, and their mothers-in-law -- with husbands and fathers-in-law interviewed to get additional perspectives. In all, 89 individuals were interviewed. Our initial universe for selecting the triads was all women with at least one son or daughter who married within the past five years but more than one year ago, so that recent decisions about marriage and childbearing initiation would have taken place. An additional criterion for inclusion was that the other senior woman in the triad (the young married woman's mother as well as her mother-in-law) should be living.

From the list of senior women in the three villages who met the above criteria, we randomly selected 10 mothers and 10 mothers-in-law who seemed to be the most empowered based on indicators measured in our 2002 survey. To reduce ambiguity in examining the role of empowerment in cross-generational processes, we included only the most empowered women--those whose empowerment scores fell in the top 25%.² A composite score ranging from zero to seven was created for this purpose using seven empowerment indicators, most of which represent empowerment in small matters.³ Each

² Although the decision to establish 25% as the cut-off point is somewhat arbitrary, it is consistent with the field research team's subjective assessment. Their impression based on our qualitative research is that about 20%–25% in the 6 villages stand out as being more empowered than the rest. The percentage would be somewhat higher or lower depending on the village.

³ 1) *Mobility*. The respondent was presented with a list of places (the market, a medical facility, outside the village, and the cinema) and asked if she had ever gone there, and whether she had gone with others or alone. One point was given for each place the woman went to and another if she went unaccompanied (hypothetical range: 0 to 8).

2) *Economic security*. Respondents were asked to indicate their personal ownership of 3 specific assets: any land, the homestead land, or the house; productive assets, such as livestock or a sewing machine; and cash savings. One point was given for each of these assets (hypothetical range: 0 to 3).

3) *Ability to make small purchases*. Respondents were asked if they personally make certain purchases, and whether they do so without their husbands' permission. These "small" (incidental) purchases included items used in family food preparation (kerosene oil, cooking oil, spices), personal items (e.g., hair oil, soap, glass bangles), and ice cream or sweets for their children. A point was given for each purchase the respondent makes herself and another point if she does not need anyone's permission to do so (hypothetical range: 0 to 6).

4) *Ability to make large purchases*. Similarly, respondents were asked whether they personally

individual variable was constructed by combining responses to two or more survey questions (see Schuler et al., 1997 for further details). As the individual indicators have different ranges, each individual score was transformed into a zero or one score so the components would have equal weight.

Since most marriages are exogamous, most daughters and their mothers-in-law, as well as the daughters-in-laws' mothers, were residing outside the primary study villages and, thus, nearly half of the above sample came from outside the three villages. A final criterion for selection was that study participants living outside the three villages had to be living within a two hour journey of a primary village using locally available means of transportation.⁴

purchase "large" items, such as pots and pans, children's clothing, saris for themselves, and the family's daily food. One point was given for each type of purchase the respondent makes and another if she typically decides to make the purchase herself (hypothetical range: 0 to 8).

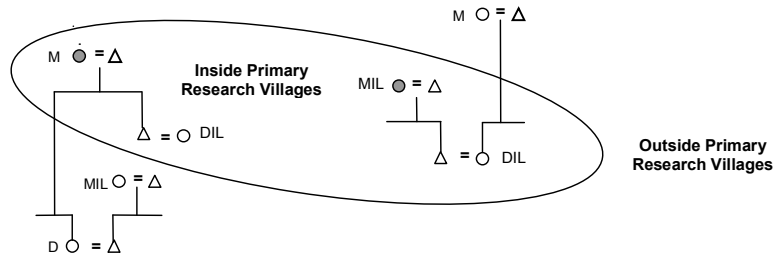
5) *Political and legal awareness.* Respondents were asked the names of their local government representative, a Member of Parliament, and the Prime Minister. They were also asked what share of property a son versus a daughter should receive according to law and to explain the significance of registering a marriage. A respondent received a point each for correctly identifying the three government officials, know that the law dictates that daughters receive 50% of property, and naming at least one benefit of marriage registration (hypothetical range: 0 to 4).

6) *Freedom from domination by the family.* The respondent was asked if, within the past year, (a) money had been taken from her against her will, (b) land, jewelry or livestock had been taken from her against her will, (c) she had been prevented from visiting her natal home, or (d) she had been prevented from working outside the home. A point was given for an *absence* of each of these events (hypothetical range: 0 to 4).

7) *Involvement in major decisions.* Respondents were asked about their involvement in household decisions involving substantial expenditures (individually or jointly with the husband) within the past few years. These pertained house repair, livestock acquisition, whether to lease or sharecrop land, and whether to buy or sell a large asset such as a boat, bicycle rickshaw, or land. A point was given for each decision that was made by the respondent herself or shared with her husband (hypothetical range: 0 to 4).

⁴ In the course of carrying out the interviews, we found that the supply of triads in which all three women were available for interview and agreed to be interviewed (2 women refused) exhausted the universe defined by the criteria, so in one case we substituted a triad where the young woman had married six rather than 5 years prior. One case was dropped because the mother did not want us to interview her outmarried daughter and mother-in-law owing to strained relations between the two families. Several others could not be interviewed because of labor migration. Thus, although we started by using a random selection process the result was a total census of triads who met the selection criteria, with the addition of two extra cases where the marriage had taken place 6-7 rather than 5 years earlier.

Principal Sampling Strategy



Note: Circles represent females and triangles males; horizontal lines represent sibling relationships, vertical lines parent-child relationships, and equal signs marriage relationships. The darkened circles represent the Ms and MILs who are the reference points for choosing the triads.

Our final sample of 20 consisted of 11 empowered mothers and nine empowered mothers-in-law; one triad was incomplete (no mother-in-law), and one additional mother triad was added to the initial sample of 10.⁵ To supplement these data we conducted three group discussions with women and three with men, one of each in each of the three villages

Interview topics

The open-ended, in-depth interviews explored how active and effective women who scored high on empowerment (based on our 2002 survey) were in delaying the marriages of their daughters and the first pregnancies and births of their daughters-in-law. We examined: (a) Strategic life choices made by mothers (or jointly by mothers and other relatives) on behalf of their children (e.g., regarding education, ages at marriage, spouse's characteristics); (b) The influence of mothers and mothers-in-law over decisions and behaviors of married children and children-in-law (e.g., regarding the timing of childbearing, use of contraception or antenatal care); (c) mothers' and mothers-in-law' direct actions (e.g., giving a daughter or daughter-in-law contraceptives); and (d) mothers' and mothers-in-law' roles in shaping the next generation's attitudes and expectations (by serving as a role model or by establishing egalitarian gender norms within the family).

⁵ We also conducted 18 "empowerment validation" interviews with women whose empowerment scores (based on the 2002 survey data) fell in the top or bottom 25% (9 from each group). The empowerment validation and sections of the broader open-ended interviews, also examined whether women who scored high on empowerment based on the 2002 survey indicators seem empowered based on qualitative assessments and explored contemporary forms of empowerment and the changing dimensions of empowerment since 1991 (when we developed our original empowerment indicators). We discuss the results of these interviews elsewhere Schuler, Sidney Ruth, Elisabeth Rottach and Lisa M. Bates. 2008. "Changing Dimensions of Women's Empowerment in Rural Bangladesh".

Data collection and analysis

The five field researchers (three women, two men) were well known in the study communities, and had excellent rapport with local residents as well as skill in building rapport with new respondents. Except in a few cases where study participants preferred not to be taped, interviews were tape recorded. The field researchers also took notes after each interview describing the setting, “body language,” and other observations and incorporated these notes into the transcribed interviews, which were then translated into English.

Case studies were prepared by compiling and comparing the triads of young married women, their mothers and their mothers-in-law along with husbands and/or fathers. Where applicable, we also included data on the marriages of other children in addition to the recently married daughter/daughter-in-law who was interviewed directly. The English transcripts were also coded by theme using an ethnographic software package, SPData, to enable a systematic assessment of supporting and counter-evidence for interpretations derived from the review of triad cases. The analysis combines “emic” and “etic” perspectives (Headland et al. 1990), examining women’s own sense of their ability to exercise agency in various situations, their understanding of the socio-cultural, political, and economic constraints they face, and the ways these subjective assessments and understandings have influenced the actions women took or did not take concerning their children. We also integrate our own understanding of the external constraints that limit women’s freedom to make meaningful choices, constraints that may be only partially visible to social actors (Bourdieu 1990).

Findings

Qualitative assessments of women who scored in the top 25 percent on empowerment in our 2002 survey suggested that almost all (19 out of 20) of these women were in fact empowered in terms of their capacity to exercise agency and make strategic life choices in a context where women’s agency is constrained by an inegalitarian gender system. Thus, we do not believe that our previous failure to detect cross-generational effects of women’s empowerment on ages at marriage and initiation of childbearing among

daughters and daughters-in-law in statistical models is explained by weaknesses in the quantitative empowerment measures we used in 2002 (also see [Schuler et al. 2008]).

Virtually everyone in the study was able to describe the disadvantages and risks of early marriage and childbearing and almost all parents of daughters indicated that they valued education and wanted their daughters to be educated. Yet most of the empowered women in our sample had recently gotten a young daughter married or recently married a son to an underage girl: among the recently married daughters of the 11 empowered mothers sampled, seven were married when they were 10-14 years of age, and three 15 – 17. (One was 18.). Seven of the 11 empowered mothers subsequently regretted marrying their daughters at such young ages, and several attempted to continue the married daughter's education and/or delay her first childbirth after her marriage. Seven of the nine empowered mothers-in-law sampled had sons who had recently married girls between ages 15 and 17.

In the following sections we present an array of data regarding who makes and who influences decisions about the timing of marriage and childbearing and what these decisions are based on. We first discuss parents' perceptions of social changes and patterns of relationships between generations that often undermine parents' potential influence in delaying childbearing in the next generation. We then explore the interactions between social and economic pressures that make poor families in this setting so vulnerable to early marriage and childbearing and illustrate the ways in which parents attempt to reduce cognitive dissonance when they confront their decisions to marry daughters at young ages or fail to intervene to delay childbearing. Interwoven with these themes (despite more than 20 years of a robust national family planning program), are the issues of incorrect information about contraceptives and poor communication between generations about family planning. Finally, we describe an alternative to early marriage of girls that emerged in only one case but is more widespread than we were able to document in this study. The findings indicate considerable variation in who makes decisions about age at marriage and childbearing and who is most risk averse. In the discussion we reconsider the phenomenon of women's empowerment in the rural Bangladesh setting, the ways in which empowerment is often entwined with poverty and

economic crises within families, and the interaction of poverty and insecurity with the persistently patriarchal institution of marriage.

Intergenerational relationships in a period of social change

We explored the theme of perceived social changes and their influence on intergenerational relationships by asking senior women to compare their own lives as young daughters-in-law with those of their own daughters-in-law and by asking about their communication and relationships with daughters, daughters-in-law and married sons. The theme of social change also came up in discussions of decision-making. One aspect of social change that appeared to contribute to early marriage was the idea that young people were more exposed to sexually explicit content in popular culture and more likely to engage in sex (this usually was described euphemistically as a deterioration in the social climate). This perception made parents reluctant to let adolescent daughters, and sons from about the age of 20, remain unmarried. They feared social humiliation if the young people got involved in love affairs or conducted themselves in ways that led others to suspect them of having affairs. Parents of adolescent schoolgirls worried both about what the girls themselves might do and about their “security” around presumably predatory young men. The influence of more liberal social norms on television and the availability of pornographic videos or DVDs which many young men reportedly watched contributed to parents’ fears. The same influences seem to have contributed to young men’s desires to get married rather than waiting, as their parents often wanted, until they were earning steady incomes.

Mothers-in-law complained that their sons were too solicitous to their wives and lacked accountability to their mothers, and that daughters-in-law did not listen to them or seek their counsel. They saw this as a recent change in the pattern of family relationships⁶ Thus, mothers-in-law who wanted their sons and daughters-in-law to delay childbearing often did not feel they had the necessary influence to get them to comply. Finally, the (often incorrect) assumption that young people knew much more than they did about

6 While the same complaints may have been heard a generation ago, there was considerable evidence that young couples often became economically independent shortly after a marriage and cooked separately, even though they might continue to share the same house with the young man’s parents.

family planning, especially educated young people, contributed to mothers' and mothers-in-law' reticence to discuss this topic in detail with their children and children-in-law.

Explanations of marriage decision-making

The presence of unmarried girls past the age of puberty and young men past some unstated age seemed to pose a threat to social cohesion in the study communities. Other villagers often created pressure on the parents of unmarried young people by gossiping about them and/or tried to be helpful by acting as freelance matchmakers. One father told us, "Everyone was worried wondering how I would manage to get my daughter married [because of my poverty]. I received good support from everyone. My neighbors love me!" The girl was only 13 when she married.

In their desperation to fulfill the obligation of marrying off their children, parents often arranged marriages impulsively and explained their actions as responses to pressure from others or as inevitable consequences of fate, perhaps preferring not to mention overtly economic motives. "See what has happened to my daughter," said one mother who clearly felt guilty about marrying off her daughter in haste, and too young, "I have given her education and now she is in a family where no one has the least respect for education. My daughter wails and blames me for marrying her into such a family." Apparently unwilling to fully accept responsibility for her own actions and her daughter's unhappy life, and chafing under the cognitive dissonance she felt, the mother told us, "Now I tell my daughter that it is because of her own misfortune that she was married into such a family. It was her destiny. Otherwise why could we not refuse this proposal when we turned down so many others? There were so many proposals....We did not agree to those proposals because we thought she should be allowed to continue her education....But we could not deny this one. It was her destiny that she would get married here." After much negotiation they had agreed to go ahead with the marriage but to keep her at home so that she could continue with school. Once the marriage took place, however, the husband's family changed their minds and finally the village leaders intervened and prevailed upon her family to take her out of school and release her to her husband. When the interviewer probed further to try to understand whether it was actually the girl's mother or her brother

who had supported the marriage the mother said, “Allah took the decision...Allah’s pen wrote her fate and it happened.”

Many other parents as well invoked God’s will to rationalize early marriages when it was clear that they were acting out of anxiety over possible damage to their daughters’ reputations and fear that dowry demands would increase if they waited too long. “People might have started gossiping about her at any time, spreading rumors, then what would we have done?!” said one empowered mother.... “He was chosen by Almighty Allah. It was His decision. It just happened.”

A father recounted, “One day the father of my son-in-law came to me and said, ‘Brother, I like your daughter. I would like to have her as a wife for my son.’ I replied, ‘But how can I give her in marriage now? She is still in school!...My daughter is still very young, how can I get her married at such an early age?!’ He replied, ‘But brother, I like your daughter!’ Then I said to him, ‘Okay, if you like her so much you can come to my house with a formal proposal.’” Later, however, he told us that the young man’s father did not demand dowry and that he was a relative, and that the wedding was accomplished at very little cost. “I was lucky,” he said. “Everything is God’s wish. I never thought my daughter’s marriage would happen this way, even in my dreams!”

In other cases economic considerations were directly stated. A young man said that both the parents and the girl herself had wanted to delay his young sister’s marriage and explained, “We are living in hard times. If a proposal came with a dowry demand of 2000 taka, from where could we have gotten that? This groom did not demand any dowry so my parents agreed to the marriage.” A mother who married off her adolescent daughter told us, “We are poor people and they did not demand any dowry. Besides, the bridegroom had a homestead, he had 10 coconut trees, so I thought, if he goes for two days without working he will be able to maintain his family by selling those coconuts. There won’t be much scarcity in their family.”

Pragmatic motives also surfaced when we explored the reasons for marrying sons to underage girls. In several cases mothers-in-law explained that they had to marry their young sons (to younger girls, taking for granted that there should be an age gap) because they needed an extra worker: “It was really difficult for me to do all the family’s work single-handedly, especially at harvest time,” one mother-in-law said,....”I had become so sick, I nearly died from my illness. I was unable to do the work myself.” She also mentioned that the girl had a fair complexion and that skin tone could have later economic repercussions: “Please! I wouldn’t accept a black girl even if they paid me....If a girl has a fair complexion so will her children, and you will not have to spend money marrying them off. If a black girl is born you will have to spend 50-60,000 taka to get her married. And you will have to give her an education.”

Poverty and vulnerability to economic crisis

Many parents from disadvantaged families rationalized their decisions to marry off daughters early in the face of the known risks of early marriage and childbearing by saying that circumstances were different for the very poor. What they meant was that the poor are more vulnerable than others to both economic crises and social disapprobation and that the prospect of marrying a daughter without dowry was so precious that parents often feel unable to refuse when such an opportunity presents itself (also see [Schuler et al. 2006a]). “If I had had the financial ability, I wouldn’t have let myself be provoked to do this,” a mother of a 12 year old bride told us. Indeed, in many cases there had been a crisis or downturn in the family’s fortune prior to the early marriage; in several cases the father was ill or had died; two families had become impoverished after being cheated; others had simply fallen on hard times because of lack of employment or business failures.

Study participants most vulnerable to economic pressures often expressed a sense of futility in planning for the future. In one case the interviewer asked a mother who had taken her daughter out of secondary school and married her to an illiterate young man whether she had thought about the potential benefits of a secondary school degree for the girl’s future. The mother responded, “What is the use of so much thinking? How is it

possible to make sense of such an idea in a family where severe hardship is always present?”

In some cases local elites and “better-offs” seemed to share the idea that education and delayed marriage (which they routinely pursued for their own daughters) were luxuries that the poor simply could not afford. Thus, we found cases where non-poor individuals helped or even pressured poor parents to arrange marriages of underage girls. In one case the uncle on whose land the family lived urged the family to marry off their 11 year old daughter to an acquaintance of his. In two instances, village elders prevailed upon poor families to accept marriage proposals. In one village a schoolteacher advised an impoverished father of an 11 year old girl, “I am her teacher, I know that soon she will begin mixing with boys on her way to school. People will start to gossip and this will bring disgrace to your daughter. It will be better if you get her married.”

To be sure, there were exceptions to this pattern. School teachers often encouraged parents to delay their daughters’ marriages, and local elites in one of the three villages encouraged and sometimes used their economic resources or influence to help girls from poor families who were promising students continue to attend school.

Roles of young men in child marriage

Parents’ intentions to wait until their sons had begun earning steady incomes and become responsible, mature young men often fell by the wayside when the young man was impatient to get married. In some cases as well, economically disadvantaged parents of young men hoped that marriage would encourage their sons to work harder and become more responsible. One mother said of her 20 year old son: “He became crazy to get married; he was telling everyone that he wanted to get married...and since he had become crazy to get married he didn’t do any work and we thought that he would start to work regularly after getting married...We both took the decision together thinking that our son might start to live his life properly (and he promised he would)...We thought that marriage would make him more sensible and responsible” (As it turned out, marriage did not have that effect on the young man.) Prevailing ideas about appropriate age

differences between husbands and wives led the family to marry the boy to a 14 year old girl, who got pregnant within a year of marriage.

In a significant number of cases (five sons of the nine empowered mothers-in-law in the sample) young men wanted to marry and forced the decision on their parents and the parents of their bride to be. We mentioned above the young man who was “crazy” to marry and led his parents to believe that he would become more hardworking if they cooperated. In another case a prospective son-in-law threatened to kidnap a young woman, take her to Dhaka, and never bring her back to see her parents if they failed to agree to have her marry him. In another, a young man threatened to commit suicide to get his parents to agree to the match. According to his mother “One day a woman came and told me, ‘Sister, if you don’t agree to marry your son to that girl he will take poison and kill himself, or he may jump in front of a moving car.’ Then I went to see the girl myself without letting my husband know. When I returned I told him, ‘I will accept that girl as my daughter-in-law. I can’t risk my son’s life by refusing.’” In another case both the prospective groom and the matchmaker threatened to take poison and a group of villagers prevailed upon the parents to agree, although the girl was only 14. In other less dramatic cases parents agreed to their sons’ marriages in order to avoid the stigma of an elopement, or sons eloped and then asked their parents to accept the fait accompli.

Failure to delay childbearing

Many of the mothers whose daughters married young (whether at their mother’s bidding or because their fathers pushed ahead without the mother’s agreement) subsequently regretted this and tried to get their daughters to delay childbearing. In two cases they appeared to be succeeding by using gifts of property and money as incentives. Usually, however, they failed. A woman who worked for an NGO-run nutrition project said that she had counseled her 15 year old married daughter to wait at least a year or two before getting pregnant. “But, [my daughter’s] in-laws were in such a hurry to have a grandchild that our suggestions had no effect,” she told the interviewer. When she spoke directly with the girl’s mother-in-law, the mother-in-law made two arguments that seemed to the mother to have merit. One was that pills will make a nulliparous woman infertile, a very

common belief in our research sites (also see [Schuler et al. 2006a]) and second that, if she did become infertile, her son would take another wife.

The enormous power of the institution of marriage in peoples' lives and their feelings of helplessness in the face of it is expressed in the following exchange between one of the field researchers and an empowered mother in which God is evoked to explain what to an outside observer might seem a confluence of misinformation and reluctance to take social and economic risks. When the researcher asked, "But if she does not take the pills properly then she can conceive anytime. What does that have to do with Allah?", the mother replied, "What I meant was that my daughter is doing what she can, she is taking pills. Now the rest depends on the hand of Allah. I already told you, Apa, that it doesn't take much to make the girls of today understand. If you go to several houses you'll see that none of the women's daughters has more than two children. But there is one problem and that is that they conceive right after marriage. Apa, this can't be stopped. If we try to stop it then the girl's in-laws would say that she's a barren woman and they would begin looking for another girl to remarry their son to."

Poor communication

Also common were cases in which the mother-in-law wanted to delay her daughter-in-law's first child but failed either because of poor communication or because the son was eager to have children. Many of the mothers-in-law in the study were ashamed to speak directly to their sons and daughters-in-law regarding sex and contraception. In some cases mothers-in-law suggestions to delay childbearing were so vague and indirect that they apparently were not understood or were not helpful. Rather than speak directly to the daughter-in-law a mother-in-law might ask a sister-in-law or other relative to speak to the young woman, or might make remarks intending them to be overheard.

Several mothers-in-law (as well as mothers) said that there was no need to speak to their daughters-in-law (or daughters) about family planning because young people now knew more than the older generation, but judging from the number of unplanned and unwanted in the sample (nine of the 20 of the young married women got pregnant unintentionally and another five were dominated by husbands or others) they may not know as much as is

presumed. In the words of one empowered mother whose daughter got pregnant and had a stillbirth at the age of 15, “Nowadays girls are very mature. They know and understand everything. There are various kinds of injections, pills and condoms for birth control. Nobody needs to teach the girls about these things—they know themselves...I thought that like other girls my daughter knew about all these things. These issues are broadcast on radio and television. I couldn’t guess that my daughter paid no attention and didn’t learn these things.” Only after she conceived, another young mother told us, did she learn that her mother-in-law too had wanted the first birth to be delayed. (This contradicted the mother-in-law’s account. The mother-in-law said she had counseled her daughter-in-law to wait several years.)

The role of young husbands in early childbearing

In some cases mothers were unable to stand up to their own sons (“I didn’t give her any suggestion thinking my son might not take that easily”/“My son had separated from us--he was beyond our control”). Moreover, mothers of young brides often were afraid to give direct advice to their sons-in-law. In a few cases, young married men wanted their wives to get pregnant to anchor them to the marriage. In one instance both the young man’s mother and his mother-in-law decided that his young wife should delay childbearing and continue with her education. The young man said to his mother, “If your daughter-in-law leaves me after pursuing her education what will I do then?... She has no need to carry on her schooling to such an extent!...I am an illiterate person. If she gets an education she may not want to live with me!”

An empowered mother-in-law who worked for a prominent NGO had wanted her 16 year-old daughter-in-law to wait a few years before having a child, thinking that she wanted to save money and build a separate room for the couple to live in, but the girl conceived a year after her marriage. “Someone put the idea in my son’s head that his wife would not be able to get loose if he could make her pregnant,” she explained. Her daughter-in-law told us she had wanted to continue her education and wait five years before having a baby, “When I began to press my husband about continuing in school he replied, ‘There is no baby in our house. It is time—we should take a baby!’...Husbands

have an apprehension in their minds that their wives may leave them and go off with someone else, so they try to make the relationship permanent by having a child. Because if a girl has a child she can't just leave the child and go away."

In still another variation on the theme of using early childbearing to stabilize the marriage, a mother-in-law counseled her daughter-in-law to get pregnant. She explained to the interviewer that her son had been scolding his wife because her family did not give dowry and had threatened to leave her. "Everything will be alright once you have a baby," she said she told the daughter-in-law... "You take a baby. The future is uncertain, and [if he leaves you] your parents too may fail to look out for you." The daughter-in-law subsequently got pregnant and had a baby daughter and, according to her mother-in-law, everything was fine.

In addition to pressuring for early marriage, early childbearing and dowry, some of the young men in the study demonstrated patriarchal attitudes in other ways. In one case, a young husband overtly resented his mother's empowerment and tried to establish a more patriarchal model for his own marriage. "After my marriage," his young wife told us, "my husband talked about his parents. He said his father does everything according to his mother's wish, and he forbade me to involve myself in any decision-making or to ever give my opinion. He told me, 'you'll have to obey me, you'll have to do as I wish. I don't want to be a husband like my father.'" She had 10 years of education and her mother had been urging her to attend the Open University and become a tutor, but this seemed unlikely.

Labor migration: an alternative to child marriage

A limitation posed by the sampling criteria used in this study (all three members of a mother – daughter – mother-in-law triad had to be available for interview and the girl had to be married within the past five years) is that it excluded young women whose marriages may have been delayed by labor migration, a relatively recent phenomenon in these particular villages. The most common type of employment for female migrants is in the garment industry, which in Bangladesh is based primarily in the capital, Dhaka (Amin

et al. 1998; Naved and Azim 2001). The second most common is probably domestic work. In one case, an empowered woman who was in our sample of mothers-in-law was also asked about her own daughters. She had sent them to work in a garment factory in Dhaka three years earlier, when the elder girl was 17 and the younger 14 years old. Asked why she sent them to work instead of getting them married, she told us that their father had died and she had been working in road construction for an NGO, CARE, which provided education on the disadvantages and risks associated with early marriage and childbearing. Moreover, she had only one son and she thought his income was insufficient for dowry. She told her daughters to work and save money for their own marriages in the conviction that women derived power from earning their own income. "I told them," she said, "you should become independent. Many girls have gone to Dhaka to work and they have become independent. They are earning and getting married with the savings from their earnings. You should do something like they are doing." According to her the girls later told her, "What is the benefit of getting married? We don't need to get married, we are earning money....We would rather find our own way. Don't worry about us." "I feel no tension about my daughters," she said....Now one daughter is 20 years old and the other is 17. If they get married now their health won't break down and they won't have too many babies....They have become mature in their thinking."

Discussion

This study uses data from a qualitative study in rural Bangladesh to: (a) explore the socio-cultural processes through which women influence empowerment and two proximate determinants of health and well-being -- age at marriage and age at initiation of childbearing -- in the next generation of women; and (b) investigate whether, and how, institutions and processes resistant to change may be undermining women's empowerment and its transmission and effects across generations. We defined women's empowerment as the capacity to exercise agency and make strategic life choices in a context where women's agency is constrained by an inequalitarian gender system.

Was our sample of empowered women really empowered and, if so, why were they not behaving, or influencing the next generation, as we might have expected them to? A

separate analysis from the same study (Schuler et al. 2008) suggests that a number of significant areas were not covered in our original set of quantitative empowerment indicators and that, although most of the indicators remain relevant, the changing context in which women live requires that the specific questions used to measure these indicators be updated. Limitations in our original set of indicators, however, did not appear to explain why we failed to find a cross-generational empowerment effect on the timing of marriage and childbearing; almost all (19 of 20) of the women identified as being in the top empowerment quartile based on those indicators also seemed empowered based on a qualitative assessment. We believe that the concept of women's empowerment is still relevant in this setting in light of certain women's aspirations, their success in developing successful economic strategies for their families, and their influence over others in their families and communities.

To understand why women who scored high on empowerment were not more active or effective in delaying the marriages of their daughters and the first pregnancies and births of their daughters-in-law, several factors must be considered, including: what empowered women want for their children, how internally consistent this set of aspirations is, how resolute the women are, and to what extent they have the ability to pursue these aspirations in light of social and economic constraints and the desires and relative power of others. We found a surprising amount of variation in the way these factors played out among the 20 triads, surprising especially given the lack of variation in certain aspects. Empowered mothers of daughters almost invariably wanted their daughters to be educated (which they saw as important for the daughter's future prosperity as well as her security and autonomy within marriage), recognized early marriage as a barrier to education, and believed that early marriage and childbearing was associated with significant health risks. However they also wanted economic security and social respectability for their daughters and they often yielded to pressure or were dominated by husbands or other relatives. Thus, it appears that empowered mothers' resolution to delay their daughters' marriages was often undermined both by inconsistencies in their aspirations for their daughters and by the domination of husbands and others in marriage decision-making.

The inconsistencies in mothers' (and fathers') aspirations regarding education and delayed marriage and childbearing for daughters reflected the pressures of poverty, which often made parents risk averse and fearful that their ability to marry their daughters well could be undermined by gossip, slander or an unfortunate turn of fate. Thus some mothers, or fathers, or both, were inclined to seize upon a reasonable opportunity to marry a daughter, especially if there was no dowry demand. Moreover, in this society it remains socially unacceptable to keep a mature daughter at home if she is not in school. When a family cannot afford the private tutoring that is almost essential for a student to do well and pass exams, it is difficult to keep the girl in school (Schuler 2007). Once out of school the only socially acceptable option most families see is marriage, although one mother in the study did delay her daughters' marriages by sending them to Dhaka to work in a garment factory. In some cases mothers continued to struggle to keep their daughters in school but fathers or other relatives prevailed.

Empowered mothers of sons were also quite homogeneous in certain ways. They were concerned with the economic viability and prosperity of their families, which they pursued by educating and/or helping (or pushing) their sons to begin working and earning. With a few exceptions (women who wanted daughters-in-law to provide household labor), mothers of sons saw early marriage and childbearing as threats to family viability and prosperity. They tried to postpone marriage and fatherhood until their sons had matured and begun earning. However this strategy was often undermined when the son pressured his parents to arrange his marriage (presumably so he would have a sexual partner). In several cases too, the young man's mother changed her strategy in the hope that marriage or childbearing would get the young man to settle down and focus on earning a living. Like most people in the society, almost all (if not all) of our sample of empowered mothers with recently married sons believed that there should be an age gap of several years between a husband and wife. As a result, many brought underage daughters-in-law into their families.

Once a marriage had taken place, a few empowered mothers tried to make it possible for the daughter to continue her education, but this rarely happened and, when it did, rarely lasted long. More commonly, mothers or mothers-in-law who had failed to prevail or

given in to the pressures for early marriage then tried to get the young couple to delay childbearing. Here there was considerable scope for failure, although there were at least two cases of highly empowered mothers who seemed to be succeeding by using economic incentives. Mothers and mothers-in-law sometimes worked in unison and sometimes at cross-purposes in delaying or encouraging early childbearing, weighing the potential costs and risks of early childbearing against those of marital instability and fear of infertility. In a substantial minority of cases it was the married son who wanted to have a child and prevailed against the wishes of his mother or mother-in-law. Educational differences between husbands and their young wives made some men insecure about keeping their brides and they saw impregnation as a way to prevent them from leaving the marriage. In just as many cases none of the key players wanted to have a child so quickly but poor information and poor communication undermined them.

Thus, women who are empowered in some aspects of their lives, value education, and know about the disadvantages and risks of early marriage and childbearing often fail to draw upon their empowerment in the most important strategic life choices they make (or might make) on behalf of their children—choices about education and marriage. They also frequently fail to influence their children’s strategic choices regarding initiation of childbearing, although many try. As for other potential modes of cross-generational influence, there were only a few cases in which mothers or mothers-in-law influenced the timing of childbearing through direct actions such as providing contraceptive information or contraceptives. They often incorrectly assumed that young people had more detailed knowledge than their elders regarding contraception. As for the potential influence of empowered women as role models, most of the senior women had themselves married and begun childbearing at young ages and thus were in no position to serve as role models in these areas of life.

Conclusions

Empowered women tend to stand out from others in terms of their aspirations for themselves and their children, but our findings suggest that they are as vulnerable as others to the pressures of poverty. The poor consider themselves to be more socially and economically vulnerable than better-off families. They often pursue early marriage and

childbearing as risk-reducing strategies even believing that early marriage and childbearing themselves carry substantial risks.

The subsequent regret that was evident in so many cases of child marriage resembles the regret that many women spoke about in the context of the recent reproductive revolution, where ideas about family size changed so rapidly that many women were left feeling that they had made a great mistake by having so many children (Schuler et al. 1996). In family planning men tended to let women make the decisions and bear the costs and risks; in the arena of marriage, men seemed to feel that they themselves had more at stake. Mothers appeared to worry more than fathers about the health risks of early marriage and childbearing, while fathers were often acutely aware of the social risks of keeping unmarried adolescent girls at home and worried about having to meet high dowry demands. Both parents were buffeted by competing ideas and pressures in the context of social change. Elites in the study communities have encouraged and sometimes assisted poor women to adopt family planning, which they saw as essential for them, despite often perceiving them as uneducated and unenlightened regarding the costs of high fertility. In this study the non-poor appeared more inclined to see early marriage of daughters as in the best interests of poor families even as they routinely delayed the marriages of their own daughters and encouraged them to stay in school. The 2004 DHS found that women ages 20-24 from the wealthiest quintile had married 3.7 years later than those from the poorest quintile—age 18.3 compared with age 14.6 (NIPORT 2005). Thus, economic and class factors are tightly interwoven with marriage ideology, and the institutions of marriage and social stratification have continued to support gender inequality and early marriage and childbearing.

This study is innovative in tracing out-married daughters and out-of-village mothers of in-married daughters. At the same time it is limited in that we did not include triads in which the mother, mother-in-law or married daughter/daughter-in-law had emigrated to Dhaka or another city for employment and had not returned. Arguably, these may have been the most empowered senior women and the junior women who married and began childbearing later.

In a previous study on early marriage and childbearing in different sites (Schuler et al. 2006a) we found more evidence of change in early marriage norms than in the present study. In the present study we thought that by sampling for empowered senior women, we would identify more positive deviants who had taken effective actions to delay marriage and childbearing in the next generation; we found few, however. This may be due to another limitation in our research—the fact both studies were conducted in very small numbers of villages; it appears that Bangladesh’s marriage transition is more advanced in the three villages where the previous study took place.

Another possible explanation for the very small number of empowered women whose daughters and daughters-in-law had married and begun childbearing later has to do with the genesis of empowerment among this generation of women (Schuler 2007). Economic and social crises pervade many empowered women’s histories ((Schuler 1991-2007) unpublished qualitative data). Among our research team we often joked about a “dud husband” theory of empowerment after finding time and again empowered women who had become so in response to economic crises involving their husbands (husbands abandoned their wives, became physically or mentally ill and unable to work, were unwilling to work, incurred gambling losses, or simply failed at their economic enterprises). Thus, it may be that in selecting a sample of empowered women we were selecting a sample of families at the economic margins of their rural society who were most prone to economic and social crisis and therefore particularly risk averse in the marriage strategies they adopted for their daughters. Among the families of the nine empowered mothers-in-law, many of the sons had dropped out of school early because their families had been unable to afford further schooling or needed them to begin earning incomes. More than half of the sons had pressed their parents to get them married or let them marry, perhaps feeling that a sexual partner was one of the few privileges that a young man with few life prospects was entitled to. In other cases mothers-in-law were desperate for an extra worker.

On a more optimistic note, with female education rapidly expanding, it is possible that new forms of empowerment are beginning to emerge which will be driven predominantly by opportunities rather than crises (Schuler 2007; Schuler et al. 2006b). Continued

support for female education at the secondary level and above, and social policies to support technical training and job creation both for young men and for young women are needed to foster these new forms of empowerment and provide viable options to early marriage and childbearing for women.

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