Gender and Family Support for Older Adults in Rural Bangladesh[a]

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Relative to other countries in Asia, our understanding of the nature of family support systems for the elderly in the South Asian context is relatively scant. Understanding the role of transfers between the elderly and kin in this region has considerable value due to the lack of formal mechanisms of support for the old, the relatively lower socioeconomic status of these populations, and the impending increase in the share and number of the elderly (Martin 1990; United Nations Population Division 2002). International agencies and existing research on the elderly from nations such as Vietnam, Singapore, Thailand, Philippines and Taiwan have emphasized the importance of investigating gender differences in elderly well-being and family support systems due to factors such as discrimination in the labor market in adulthood and greater time spent in widowhood by elderly women (*e.g.* Friedman et al 2003; Knodel and Ofstedal 2003; Ofstedal, Knodel and Chayovan 1999). Such concerns are likely to be especially important among the South Asian elderly given the larger gender disparities in labor force participation and schooling compared to other nations in this region (World Bank 1995).

In this paper, we have three main aims 1) to describe the nature of family support systems for older adults in rural Bangladesh, 2) to understand whether and how gender relates to family support in this setting, and 3) to compare findings from Bangladesh with those from other nations in Southeast Asia. In doing so, we augment a growing body of research on the extent of inter (and intra) generational exchanges and provide insight on the situation of older adults in a rural South Asian setting that is fairly representative of Bangladesh (Rahman, Foster and Menken 1992), and other rural populations in South Asia.

Data and Methods

We use information on 3,417 individuals age 50 and above from the Matlab Health and Socioeconomic Survey (MHSS) conducted in Matlab, Bangladesh in 1996 (Rahman et al 2001). Table 1 shows means for some characteristics of the Matlab sample. The methodology consists of computing various descriptive measures of four main dimensions of old age support systems: 1) patterns of living arrangements and coresidence with children 2) the nature and mean amounts of transfers of money, goods or services between older adults and their children and siblings 3) the extent and frequency of visits and contact of older adults with non-coresident children, siblings and other family members not including children and siblings 4) the extent of the aforementioned support systems for the subset of older adults who are either not coresiding with any children and/or live with no family members. Since a main aim of the paper is to conduct comparisons between Bangladesh and other primarily East and Southeast Asian countries, the measures are constructed in the same way as those in existing studies (e.g. Knodel and Ofstedal, 2002; Ofstedal, Knodel and Chayovan 1999).

Exposure to widowhood is more common among women than men (see Table 1). Thus all analyses stratify by gender and marital status. There are important differences in the nature of marriage systems across Asia that have important implications for the role of sons compared to daughters or brothers compared to sisters for exchanges with the elderly (Mason 1992). In Bangladesh, patrilocal family systems imply a disruption in ties between married women and their parents not found in the bilaterial stem family arrangements in contexts such as Thailand and the Philippines (Cain 1986). Thus, when appropriate, the above results are shown separately by the gender of the child or sibling.

Main Findings

As shown in Table 2, a large proportion of individuals age 50 or above (82 percent) coreside with a child. Unmarried men and women are more likely than their married counterparts to coreside without children or spouses or to live in a single person household. The levels of coresidence with sons are markedly higher than those with daughters (see Table 3). Specifically, older adults are anywhere from 1.4 to 3.6 times more likely to coreside with a son than a daughter. Ratios for married sons and daughters are higher at 6.7 to 9.5. The preference for coresidence with sons is at contrast with the situation in Thailand, the Philippines and among ethnic Malays in Singapore where preference is either in favor of daughters or equally distributed in favor of children of each gender. These results for Bangladesh appears to resemble patterns found in other patrilocal societies such as Taiwan, while parts of Singapore (i.e. the Chinese and Indians) appear to be intermediate between Taiwan, Bangladesh and Thailand. (Knodel and Ofstedal 2002, Ofstedal, Knodel and Chayovan 1999). The proportion of older adults who coreside with a child for those with only married daughters compared to those with only married sons differ considerably (36 percent compared to 66 percent) indicating levels of inflexibility in coresidence with respect to the gender of children similar to those found in Taiwan (Knodel and Ofstedal 2002).

Anywhere from 39 to 45 percent of older adults respondents receive any money, goods or services from a non-coresident child (Table 3). On average, unmarried women are more likely to receive support (irrespective of gender or marital status of the child) than unmarried men. As found for coresidence, sons are more likely to provide support than daughters in terms of provision per se and the average amount of support provided to a parent. The average amount of the transfer received by a parent is larger for men than women, though the reverse pattern is found among the unmarried group. Compared to receipt of support, relatively few older adults provide material or monetary support to children, which is in contrast with the case of countries such as the Philippines and Thailand but similar to Taiwan (Biddlecom, Chayovan and Ofstedal 2002). When the definition of support is extended to caring for grandchildren or house work, 88 to 90 percent of older adults are involved, with no significant differences between men and women. These rates are markedly higher than for those reported in the Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand and Singapore (Biddlecom, Chayovan and Ofstedal 2002). Older women are more likely than men to do housework, and there is marked decline among the unmarried that is more pronounced for elderly men than for women. Siblings of older adults are an unimportant source of support relative to children, though rates of receiving aid from a sibling are highest at 10 percent among unmarried women.

About two-thirds of older respondents report seeing a child on a monthly basis or more (Table 4). Sons are more likely than daughters to live adjacent to or see a parent daily, particularly for older women than men irrespective of marital status. Due to their greater propensity to provide monthly visits, however, daughters are more likely to interact with parents than sons on a monthly or more frequent basis. Once conditioned on location with respect to their parents, the levels of monthly or yearly visits provided by children do not differ by gender (Table 5). But provision of material or monetary support or weekly/daily contacts with parents is higher among sons than daughters.

Unlike contacts with children, living near or seeing siblings is significantly more common among older men compared to older women irrespective of marital status (Table 6). Virtually all and 65-70 percent of older men have at least monthly contact with brothers and sisters respectively. Among older women, 43 to 47 percent see brothers monthly or more, while only 16-17 percent see them daily or live nearby. Rates of contacts with sisters among older women are slightly lower but similar to those for contact with brothers. Older men are significantly more likely than older women

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to visit a relative who resides outside their main compound on a weekly basis or more, though 40 to 45 percent of elderly women also engage in such visits. Older men are also more likely to receive visits from relatives from outside the compound than women (58 compared to 52 percent), though the levels of visits received by the unmarried are not significantly different by gender.

Among older adults who do not live with a child, rates of living with a spouse are considerably lower among women than men (25 compared to 41 percent, Table 7) due to the greater propensity for widowhood among women. As a consequence, women are more likely than men to live with a relative excluding their spouse, with a child or siblings, or alone. Women are more likely than men to receive support from a non-coresident child, though the average amounts they receive are considerably lower than those received by men. Among the largely female group of older adults who live alone, 75 percent receive support from a child. This level is higher than for older men and women generally, and those who are not living with children. Though they reside alone, this is apparently not a socially isolated group of elderly. Namely, 55 percent see a child on a frequent basis, while virtually all of the remaining see a child or other relative on at least a monthly basis.

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Table 1. Select Characteristics of Individuals Age 50+ by Gender and Age, Matlab 1996 (means)

	Men	Women	Total
Any reading ability	42.6	12.2	27.5
Currently Working	80.4	46.4	63.5
Years of Education	2.8	0.6	1.7
Married	95.2	61.4	78.4
Widowed	4.0	38.0	20.9
Age Distribution			
50 to 59	43.5	55.9	49.7
60 to 69	37.7	31.7	34.7
70+	18.6	12.3	15.5
Number of living children	5.1	4.9	5.0
Sample Size (unweighted)	1730	1687	3417
Sample Size (weighted)	1726	1679	3405

Table 2. Pattern of Living Arrangements of Older Adults by Gender and Marital Status, Matlab 1996

% who live with:	Men	Women	Marr Men	Marr Women	Unmarr Men	Unmarr Women	Total
A child	86.4	77.6	86.9	79.2	76.0	75.0	82.0
A spouse or child	98.4	89.0	99.5	97.7	76.0	75.0	93.7
An adult child	68.6	70.0	68.6	72.3	68.9	66.4	69.3
A married child	36.8	49.6	35.6	42.4	61.5	61.1	43.1
With a relative only[1]	0.9	5.6	0.4	(1.1)	(12.3)	12.6	3.2
A spouse only	11.9	11.4	12.5	18.4	na	na	11.6
Alone	0.6	5.4	1.0	(1.1)	(11.6)	12.3	2.9

1 excluding spouse or child

n.a. not applicable

( ) cell entry based on 35 cases or less.

Table 3. Living Arrangements by Gender and Marital Status (conditioned on availability of each child subtype), Matlab 1996

% who live with	Men	Women	Unmarr Men	Unmarr Women	Test for Gender Difference (unmarried)	Test for Gender Difference (all)
A child	87.5	79.0	80.1	77.8	ns	*
A son	83.2	75.4	73.7	75.5	ns	*
A daughter	56.4	34.3	(28.9)	20.9	ns	*
A married son	52.7	57.0	65.2	66.9	ns	ns
A married daughter	5.5	6.0	(9.6)	7.0	ns	ns
Unmarried (adult) son	73.8	73.0	(54.5)	64.8	ns	ns
Unmarried (adult) daughter	79.1	67.7	(45.0)	49.6	ns	*
Coresidence Ratios:						
Son/Daughter	1.4	2.2	2.5	3.6		
Son/Daughter (married)	9.5	9.5	6.7	9.5		
Son/Daughter (single adult)	0.93	1.0	1.2	1.3		
Coresidence for those with:	%	N				
Only married sons	66.3	154				
Only married daughters	35.9	74				
	%	N				
Only married children	60.0	945				
Standardized[a]	69.0	945				

a Standardized on the distribution of married children for all families with only married children, all of whom are the same sex.

~p<.10 +p<.05 *p<.01 n.s. not significant at 10 percent level.

( ) cell entry based on 35 cases or less

Table 4. Exchanges with Non-Coresident Kin (conditioned on availability of kin of each subtype), Matlab 1996

% received money, goods or services from:	Men	Women	Marr Men	Marr Women	Test for Gender Difference	Unmarr Men	Unmarr Women	Test for Gender Difference (unmarried)	Test for Gender Difference (all)
Any non-coresident child	39.0	46.6	39.1	44.6	~	(37.8)	49.8	ns	*
Son	49.1	51.7	49.6	49.7	ns	(40.1)	55.1	~	~
Daughter	9.6	19.7	9.5	18.8	*	(11.1)	21.3	ns	*
Married Son	44.5	48.3	45.5	46.1	ns	(31.0)	51.8	+	ns
Married Daughter	8.2	17.5	8.1	17.1	*	(11.2)	18.0	ns	*
Unmarried adult son	46.7	44.5	46.8	42.6	ns	(44.8)	50.4	ns	ns
Unmarried adult daughter	(21.8)	22.4	(21.0)	(18.3)	ns	(30.2)	(28.3)	ns	ns
Mean amount received (taka):									
From Son	14352	6461	14989	6476	*	3457	6436	ns	*
From Daughter	489	335	502	296	ns	254	399	ns	ns
% who provide support to a child	16.6	11.9	16.8	14.3	ns	(13.0)	7.8	ns	*
% who receive support from a sibling	3.0	9.45	3.0	8.9	*	(3.44)	10.4	~	*
For all older adults:									
Care for grandchildren[a]	88.4	90.3	88.4	92.7	*	89.1	87.2	ns	ns
Perform household chores	67.6	82.2	68.5	87.2	*	48.6	74.3	*	*
Ratio of Receipt of Support for:									
Son/Daughter	5.1	2.6	5.2	2.6		3.4	2.5		
Son/Daughter (married)	5.3	2.7	5.6	2.7		2.7	2.8		
Son/Daughter (single adult)	2.1	2.0	2.2	2.3		1.5	1.8		

a for those with a grandchild residing in same bari.

~p<.10 +p<.05 *p<.01 n.s. not significant at 10 percent level. ( ) cell entry based on 35 cases or less

Table 5. Percent of Non-Coresident Children Providing Visits or Material Support by Location and Sex of Child

	Provide money, goods or services	Visit yearly or never	Visit at least monthly	Visit at least weekly	*% distribution by location*
Sons					**Sons**
Location					
Same bari or village	19.1	5.4	94.6	84.2	27.5
Same district	15.3	28.2	71.7	21.5	7.7
Same country	45.6	49.4	50.5	3.4	47.0
Abroad	51.7	91.0	8.9	(2.3)	17.7
Total	37.0	43.0	56.9	26.9	100
N (min/max, weighted)					4607/4636
Daughters					**Daughters**
Location					
Same bari or village	7.5	9.3	90.7	58.7	13.8
Same district	6.8	28.5	71.4	8.8	54.7
Same country	14.5	54.8	45.1	3.7	29.8
Abroad	(10.9)	82.0	(17.9)	(6.6)	1.4
Total	9.3	34.5	65.4	14.2	100
N (min/max, weighted)					6057/6133

( ) cell entry based on 35 cases or less

Table 6. Interaction with Non-Coresident Children (conditioned on availability of child of each type)

% of older adults	Men	Women	Marr Men	Marr Women	Test for Gender Difference (married)	Unmarr Men	Unmarr Women	Test for Gender Difference (unmarried)	Test for Gender Difference (all)
Contact with Sons:									
Live next door to or see daily	33.2	42.2	35.6	41.8	~	49.2	55.6	ns	*
See monthly or more	60.9	64.6	60.4	64.2	ns	69.2	65.2	ns	ns
Contact with Daughters									
Live next door to or see daily	26.0	22.8	22.2	25.6	ns	32.1	26.6	ns	ns
See monthly or more	80.2	72.3	80.7	73.0	*	71.6	71.0	ns	*
Ratio of Contact									
Sons/Daughters (daily)	1.3	1.9	1.6	1.6		1.5	2.1		
Sons/Daughters (monthly or more)	0.8	0.9	0.8	0.9		1.0	0.9		

~p<.10 +p<.05 *p<.01 n.s. not significant at 10 percent level.
( ) cell entry based on 35 cases or less

Table 7. Interaction with Non-Coresident Sibling for those with Sibling of Each Type, Matlab 1996

% of older adults:	Men	Women	Marr Men	Marr Women	Test for Gender Difference (married)	Unmarr Men	Unmarr Women	Test for Gender Difference (unmarried)	Test for Gender Difference(all)
Contact with Brothers									
Live next door to or see daily	84.3	16.6	84.7	16.8	*	75.6	16.0	*	*
See monthly or more	92.1	45.4	92.3	46.5	*	87.2	42.9	*	*
Contact with Sisters									
Live next door to or see daily	25.4	14.2	24.9	13.3	*	36.9	16.0	+	*
See monthly or more	69.1	39.5	69.3	41.4	*	64.6	35.8	*	*
Ratio of Contact									
Brothers/Sisters (daily)	3.3	1.2	3.4	1.3		2.0	1.0		
Brothers/Sisters (monthly or more)	1.3	1.1	1.3	1.1		1.3	1.2		
For all older adults:									
% who visit a relative at least weekly	63.7	42.4	64.0	44.0	*	57.7	40.0	+	*
% who have a relative visit them at least weekly	58.3	52.0	58.7	54.6	ns	50.7	47.8	ns	*

~p<.10 +p<.05 *p<.01 n.s. not significant at 10 percent level.
( ) cell entry based on 35 cases or less

Table 8. Patterns of Living Arrangements and Support Receipt for Non-Coresident Older Adults (with living children)

For non-coresident older adults:	Men	Women	Total
% distribution (mutually exclusive hierarchichal categories)			
Child lives in same compound or village	55.7	53.8	54.5
Lives with spouse	41.4	24.9	31.3
Lives with a relative[a]	2.9	12.3	8.7
Lives with a non-related individual	0	0	0
Live alone and child visits weekly or daily	0	4.8	2.9
Otherwise lives alone	0	4.2	2.6
Total	100	100	100
N (weighted)	210	333	543
Receive support from non-coresident child	59.9	68.3	65.1
Mean amount received (taka)	10025.8	4914.3	6834.3
For older adults who live alone:	%		
Receive support from a non-coresident child	74.4		
Mean amount received (taka)	4919.8		
Contact with Kin			
A child visits weekly or daily	54.7		
A child visits monthly	29.3		
Respondent visits relatives monthly or more	13.3		
Other relative visits monthly or more	1.3		
A child visit yearly	0		
No contact with kin	1.3		
Total	100.0		
N (weighted)	74		

a not including spouse, children or siblings. Table adapted from Knodel et al (2000).