

Cross-generational Effects of Women's Empowerment in Rural Bangladesh

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The South Asian mother-in-law has been vilified in literature and oral traditions from the health and family planning fields as a promoter of pronatalism, son preference, harmful traditional health practices, failure to seek reproductive health care, and domestic violence against young daughters-in-law. This paper examines the hypothesis that when mothers and mother-in-law are empowered socially and economically there will be tangible benefits for the health and well-being of the next generation. Recent data from interviews with married men and women and their mothers and mothers-in-law are used to investigate the effects of women's empowerment on a range of next-generation outcomes including: age at marriage and first birth, educational attainment, empowerment and gender attitudes, experiences of domestic violence, and reproductive health outcomes and behavior. Case studies are used to explore the strategies women employ to try to influence the behavior of their sons, daughters and daughters-in-law and to ensure their welfare.

The South Asian mother-in-law has been vilified in literature and oral traditions from the health and family planning fields as a promoter of pronatalism (Senayake 1986), son preference (Pettigrew 1986, Winkvist and Akhtar 2000) and harmful traditional health practices, and for obstructing daughters-in-law from seeking reproductive health care (Barua and Kurz 2001), discouraging communication and joint decision-making between young married men and their wives (Nag and Duza 1988), and instigating and perpetrating and domestic violence against young daughters-in-law (Fernandez 1997, Muthal-Rathore et al. 2002). In recent years family planning and maternal and child health programs have adopted strategies "targeting mothers-in-law" in order to persuade them to support contraceptive use and other behaviors affecting the reproductive health of younger women (e.g. Fikree et al. 2001, Barnett 1998). Yet in some South Asian settings, including Bangladesh, reproductive norms have been changing and the constraints imposed on women by patriarchal social norms have been loosening in some aspects of life (Hussain 1999, Amin et al. 1997, Schuler et al. 2003).

This paper presents findings from a study examining inter-generational influences on gender relations among married young people and on their health and well-being. The inter-generational study is part of a larger research project on gender inequality, women's empowerment and reproductive health that began in 1991. The purpose is to identify factors that support gender-equitable relationships, especially in the area of reproductive health. The present study combines qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the effects of women's empowerment (measured in 1994 and 2002) on a range of outcomes related to the health and well-being of the next generation. At the 2003 PAA meetings we presented analyses examining relationships between mother's empowerment and two outcomes: daughters' ages

at marriage and desired age at marriage for daughters who are as yet unmarried, both as reported by the mothers (Schuler et al., 2003). We found some evidence that mothers' empowerment was associated with later marriage of daughters and later desired ages at marriage for daughters but the relationships were not as strong as we had expected. Qualitative findings revealed considerable ambivalence in attitudes and family strategies relating to the age at marriage of daughters, suggesting that norms may be in flux. In the present paper we will link survey data from mothers and daughters so that additional variables can be incorporated to reexamine the effects of mothers' empowerment on daughter's ages at marriage. We will also examine changes in family strategies in the marriages of first-born versus younger daughters. Qualitative data suggest that some parents marry off first-born daughters at very young ages and then modify their strategies in arranging marriages for other daughters after seeing the negative affects of very early marriage on the eldest daughter's life.

We will look as well at several other possible effects of empowerment in mothers and mothers-in-law on the lives of their daughters, sons and daughters-in-law. These analyses will be based on qualitative case studies and on multivariate analyses of survey data in which we have linked the senior women's interview data with data from interviews with sons and with daughters-in-law. Besides age at marriage, the outcomes we will examine in the paper include: age at birth of the first child, educational attainment, empowerment, gender attitudes, experiences of domestic violence, and reproductive health outcomes and behavior.

Hypotheses

Our general hypothesis is that empowered women (mothers and mothers-in-law) foster gender equity and better reproductive health in the marital relationships of their sons and daughters. Women's empowerment may influence second generation relationships and gender equity both indirectly by shaping their children's attitudes, expectations, and opportunities, and directly by affecting the decisions and behaviors of the couple. Specifically, we hypothesize that empowerment of women will be associated in the next generation with:

1. Marriage arrangements that are less likely to reinforce gender inequality--for example, daughters are more likely to marry later, sons are less likely to marry girls under the legal minimum age at marriage, and sons and daughters are less likely to enter into marriage with an age difference of 10 years or more between spouses.
2. Greater gender equity in the home--for example, young women are more likely to have access to household resources, such as food and money, and their husbands are less likely to use physical violence against them.
3. Greater participation of young women in the public sphere --for example, young women have greater freedom of movement, are more likely to be aware of and contribute to community life, and are better able to take advantage of health services and economic and educational opportunities outside the home.

4. Greater involvement of young men in reproductive health--for example, young men have more extensive communication with their wives about reproductive health issues, are more likely to use condoms, and are more likely to assist their wives in getting access to contraceptive methods and related services, and more likely to believe that a married women has the right to refuse her husband when she does not wish to engage in sex.

Sites

The research sites are 6 villages where we have been working since 1991. When we began, micro-credit programs existed in 4 villages, but there were few other enabling conditions for women's empowerment, and reproductive norms were changing rapidly, but changes in gender norms were quite limited. Nonetheless, we documented substantial differences in women's levels of empowerment both within and between villages. The range of possible enabling factors has increased since then, and now includes girls' education initiatives, voter participation campaigns, improvements in (and increased promotion of) health and family planning services outside the home, and mass communications aimed at reducing son preference and gender-based discrimination. Women's use of health services outside the home has increased dramatically since 1991.

Data and methods

The data consist of a 1994 survey of all married women under age 50 in 6 villages, a follow-up survey conducted in early 2002, and in-depth data from 120 households, with detailed case studies of approximately 35 families.

The 1994 survey includes variables related to gender and empowerment, domestic violence, use of health services, and contraceptive use and fertility. The survey includes a series of questions from which we constructed 8 indicators of women's empowerment and an aggregate score. The core hypothesized domains of empowerment include mobility, economic security, status and decision-making within the household, ability to interact effectively in the public sphere, and participation in non-family groups. The questions and methods used to construct 8 indicators and an aggregate "empowerment" score are described in Schuler et al., 1997. About 22% of the 838 married women in the 6 villages were "empowered" in 1994 based on the aggregate empowerment indicator, with the percent of empowered women in each village ranging from 16% to 32%. Just over 70% reported that they were married by age 15.

The 2002 survey was administered to 3 categories of respondents: women who were interviewed in the 1994 survey; all other married women in the 6 villages who are below age 50; and husbands of young women interviewed. The women's questionnaire included the same measures of empowerment used in the 1994 survey as well as additional questions to permit testing of the hypotheses listed above. The survey included questions on actual behaviors (e.g., children's ages at marriage), as well as gender attitudes (e.g., men's rights and roles in sexual and reproductive health), and intentions (e.g.,

planned/desired marriage age of children). The survey of husbands focused primarily on their gender attitudes; couple outcomes (e.g., partner communication regarding reproductive health) were ascertained through the wives' interviews. The sampling design allows us to compare data between 1994 and 2002 (at the aggregate and individual levels) and to link the interviews of mothers, their sons, and their daughters-in law. Because only a minority of marriages take place within the same village, and residence is patrilocal, we were able to locate only a few married daughters, but mothers were asked to provide information about their married daughters (e.g., age at marriage and first birth, educational attainment, etc.).

Qualitative case studies currently underway explore the same issues in more depth, and document attitudes and decision-making processes underlying the behaviors of interest. The case studies focus on approximately 35 young couples (wife 24 years of age or below) who are co-residing with, or living near, the young man's mother. We will investigate policy and program influences on women's empowerment both through the structured surveys and qualitatively.

In the paper we will employ a number of methods to estimate the effects of mother's empowerment on their children's characteristics, marital relationships and reproductive health outcomes. Using the cross-sectional data, we will look at the associations between mothers' present empowerment indicators and the behaviors, attitudes, and intentions of their children. We will also analyze these relationships longitudinally among a subset of the sample on which we have data from the 1994 survey.¹ Multiple linear and logistic regression models will be used to estimate the effects of maternal/mother-in-law empowerment on most of the outcomes (e.g., contraceptive use, experiences of domestic violence and other behaviors, and gender attitudes), and survival analysis will be used to estimate the impact of mother's empowerment on children's ages at marriage and first birth and educational attainment.

In addition to testing these hypotheses with the quantitative data, we will use qualitative data to explore the processes through which intergenerational effects of empowerment may operate. Specifically, we will draw from the qualitative case studies to explore the attitudes of "empowered" women (identified based both on their quantitative empowerment scores and on qualitative assessments by the research team) towards their offspring and daughters-in-law, and the strategies these women employ to influence the behavior of the next generation and to ensure their welfare. We will compare qualitatively the interactions between generations in these families with those in similar families in which the senior woman is determined to be unempowered.

Expected Findings

Preliminary findings from the qualitative case studies illustrate how empowered mothers and mothers-in-law employ a variety of strategies to influence the behavior of their children and daughters-in-law

¹ We estimate that of the women interviewed in 1994 in the six villages there are at least 540 children who have reached marriageable age.

and to ensure their welfare. For example: encouraging daughters to study, registering their marriages, contributing to their dowry, encouraging them to delay their first pregnancy; teaching daughters-in-law how to travel to public places, helping them to join NGO programs, get jobs or become involved in self-employment activities, encouraging and helping them to adopt contraceptives or to seek prenatal care, and sometimes actively intervening when their sons become physically violent with their wives. Although many of the senior women see disadvantages in early marriage, and in principle want to delay the marriages of their daughters and avoid letting their sons marry very young girls, in practice they often relent in this in order to minimize risk or to gain what they see as more important advantages for their children. Such cases will be elaborated in the paper, and juxtaposed with the quantitative analyses of inter-generational influences.

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