

Institutionalized Powerlessness in Context: The Static and Dynamic Nature of Women's Status in Rural Bangladesh

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Abstract

Understanding the institutional structures surrounding the social status of women is an important topic in studies of gender and inter-generational relationships. This article uses exchange theory to examine the status and familial interactions of women in rural Bangladesh throughout their lives. Overall, their status today remains low but it does fluctuate according to a highly institutionalized pattern of family-based social expectations. Furthermore, this article shows that although the institutions defining a woman's status appear to be stable, they are also changing because of the society's exposure to recent worldwide advances in family planning and health care.

Key Words: Women, Power, Rural Bangladesh

Introduction

Analyzing the institutional structure of family relationships provides a sturdy platform from which one can examine and understand the maintenance of low status characterizing the lives of women in rural Bangladesh. Social institutions rigorously define the narrow latitudes within which cultural actors must navigate and they are often described as static partially because of the temporally limited perspective of synchronic ethnographic fieldwork. We must not, however, lose track of the fact that culture is dynamic and that despite institutional rigors cultural change is inevitable. The principal focus of this article uses the perspective of exchange theory (see Blau 1964; Emerson 1962) to highlight the strength of the traditional family institutions undermining the status of women in rural Bangladesh. It also addresses how recent developments including emergent fertility control and increased longevity appear to be transforming the variation in the status of women over the life-course. Although the strength of the traditional structures seems firmly intact, the new changes reflecting the incursions of the modern world may have long-term significance.²

Similar to the life experiences of women in many traditional societies (see Brown 1982; Brown and Kerns 1985; Dickerson-Putman and Brown 1994), the status of rural Bangladeshi women typically begins to increase after they have been married for several years. Compared to many young wives, middle age women are able to enjoy relatively powerful family interactions and positions. The duration of middle age is relatively short, however, and most women find it progressively difficult to maintain a secure position in the family as they become older. This condition is the result of a highly constraining and stable set of social institutions in addition to the inevitable decline of one's health that comes with old age.

According to exchange theorists (i.e. Dowd 1975; Mulkay 1971), institutionalization is the repetitive performance of a behavior, or set of behaviors that eventually not only take on a normative status, but also embody something that is culturally perceived as valuable. The institutions validate and discourage, therefore, any deviation from the expected types of interpersonal relationships in a culture. The authors indicate that while there are exceptions, the majority of Bangladeshi women follow a predictable pattern of prescribed familial interaction that changes behaviorally as they become older. Overall their status remains low and is

especially pronounced when they are young wives or reach old age. Their lives demonstrate, therefore, how institutionalization is particularly effective at keeping powerless individuals from enhancing their status because they must submit to the normative expectations defining their roles in society.

The authors also emphasize that institutions are not static. Some young wives have recently gained more autonomy over their reproductive behavior because of a new social emphasis on fertility control. Although this emerging source of autonomy may affect a young woman's status, it is unclear whether it has significantly influenced other dimensions of their familial roles that continue to be constrained by traditional institutions. For older women, the increase in Bangladeshi longevity has now extended the length of time many of them must suffer the negative social, physical, and psychological consequences of the aging process. These consequences are linked to their failure to accumulate social resources during earlier years and their progressively deteriorating health. This represents a new source of stress that has further exacerbated the institutionalized quality of misery associated with a woman's status in old age.

Although the focus on social dynamics in the present study is on reproductive behavior and prolonged longevity, the recent prevalence of micro-finance programs are also changing the social status of poor Bangladeshi women. Since the 1980s, an increasing number of rural women have become involved in such programs, which are designed to alleviate poverty. These programs are run by both government agencies and nongovernmental organizations like the Grameen Bank and the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (see Korten 1989; Ray 1987; Yunus 2003). The authors acknowledge this phenomenon as a significant source of social change, especially with regard to the economically based power struggle between men and women, but it is not treated explicitly in the following discussion.³ Considerable research on this important topic can be found elsewhere (i.e. Ackerly 1995; Goetz and Gupta 1996; Hashemi et al. 1996; Rahman 1999; Schuler et al. 1997; Todd 1996; World Bank 1999).

The following discussion is based on qualitative first-hand information collected by the primary author in Bangladesh during 1995 and 1996. It is divided into seven sections. The first section provides an outline of exchange theory and why it represents a useful framework for analyzing the institutionalized status of women in rural Bangladesh. The next section briefly describes some current statistics on Bangladesh and how the data for this study was retrieved. The third section sketches the normative institutions framing the behavior of rural Bangladeshi women. The remaining four sections discuss the culturally prescribed qualities characteristic of their lives when they are newly married, making the transition to middle age, during middle age, and finally during old age, respectively.

Exchange Theory

Exchange theory is predicated on the simple notion that an individual's interactions are based on attempts to maximize rewards and minimize costs --both material and non-material (Dowd 1975, 1980; Knipe 1971). Individuals are motivated to invest in interactions that garner more rewards than costs. Interactions will be terminated when costs become excessive, or when a new alternative exchange partner with less costly demands becomes available (Bengston et al. 1997; Dowd 1975; Emerson 1962). Many interactions are often unbalanced exchange relationships in which one participant is more dependent on (or desirous of) the rewards provided by the other who holds a greater share of valued resources. In such cases, the individual with more resources can impose a rate of exchange most favorable to him/her by threatening to curtail the interaction (Nelson 2000). The individual with fewer resources can opt out of such an

unfavorable relationship (Berger 1994; Thibaut and Kelley 1959). It is often the case, however, that the subordinate participant will opt to stay in the relationship because he/she is dependent on the rewards the dominant participant can provide. Therefore, the subordinate individual usually accepts the imposed exchange rate and will reduce his/her own demands to achieve an acceptable balance between the rewards and costs (Nelson 2000). In other words, the weaker individual may still perceive an acceptable level of reward, but the gains relative to the costs are less than they would be in a balanced relationship.

In such interactions, the one who imposes the rate of exchange has a certain measure of power over the other. Power is defined as "the state of relative independence that results from having a greater share of valued resources than one's exchange partner" (Dowd 1983:29). Power, therefore, derives from valued resources (or power resources). While such resources may be wealth, knowledge, skills, and social position, they may also be approval, respect, and compliance (Blau 1964; Dowd 1975). What is considered a valuable resource, and who has access to certain resources are largely determined by culture (Akiyama et al. 1997). It is often the case that an individual with limited resources will comply submissively to acquire rewards even though he/she may not consider the situation to be highly desirable (Mulkay 1971).

Exchange theorists emphasize that compliance is often institutionalized. For example, when an old worker's productivity begins to decline, his supervisor may offer him a less prestigious position. He accepts the offer because he is dependent on the income although the amount he will gain in the new position will be less. As his performance further declines, he will eventually be asked to resign and receive retirement compensation. He must accept the offer because he has no power resources other than compliance with which to exchange for his income. In Western societies, such a scenario has been repeated so many times that it "has become routinized, institutionalized, and legitimated" (Dowd 1975:590).

When exchanges are institutionalized, the individual with little power is likely to be more pressured to accept undesirable offers from exchange partners with more power. Institutionalization can mean the establishment of social norms, which prescribe proper behavior. For example, if an older worker refuses to retire despite such a norm, then his relatives, peers, and neighbors may sanction him (Mulkay 1971). In many cases, institutionalization also generates cultural values that embody goals or desirable ways of life. When retirement is considered a desirable goal at the end of one's working years, an old worker will expect social approval and acknowledgment from those around him when he retires (Dowd 1975; Mulkay 1971). This approval is a type of reward as is the retirement money that he will receive in exchange for his compliance. Therefore, if he follows the institutionalized framework defining retirement, then he will receive socially approved status and economic security although the value of those rewards may not be exceptionally high. Compliance is a costly behavior because it is the acceptance of a one-way offer from an exchange partner. Despite the costs, however, a powerless individual must often comply with such one-way offers particularly when power-based relationships are institutionalized. As the following discussion demonstrates, the relatively low status of rural Bangladeshi women predominantly relates to the fact that compliance is the principal resource they must use in social exchanges throughout most of their lives.

Study Background

Before describing the institutional nature of women's status in rural Bangladesh, it is necessary to review some basic characteristics about the society and the methods used to collect data for this study. Bangladesh is one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world.

In 1998, the country's GNP per capita was as low as \$350, and the literacy rate of adults (age 15 and above) was 40.1 percent (Human Development Report 2000). Between 1981 and 1993, 26 percent of Bangladeshi people did not have access to health services, and sanitation systems were not available to at least 57 percent of the population prior to 1998 (Human Development Report 2000). While urbanization is ongoing, 80 percent of the people reside in rural areas where traditional socio-economic characteristics remain relatively unchanged (Cleland et al. 1994:78). In a typical rural village, the economy is predominantly based on subsistence agriculture although fishing is also prevalent. The vast majority of villagers are not wealthy, and many of them are unemployed or have only temporary jobs. Overall, the level of education is low but has recently been on the increase. The dominant religion Muslim but about 22% of the population is Hindu. The lives of the women discussed here play out within this general rural social context.

Interviews and observations were used to collect the following data from an area referred to as Matlab, located about 45 kilometers southeast of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. This area is relatively isolated and inaccessible because of an immense river system, and it exhibits characteristics typical of rural Bangladesh. Data collection was originally designed to examine mothers-in-law's influence on the reproductive behavior of their young daughters-in-law. Fieldwork consisted of questionnaire-interviews conducted at rural residences with a total of 447 pairs of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. This initial phase emphasized the retrieval of information on their socio-demographic status, reproductive behavior, and fertility views (see Nosaka 1997, 2000). Afterwards, 20 households were selected for return visits to acquire qualitative information on women's family interactions and to conduct more extended observations of their daily activities. These households were selected with the intention of collecting information from women with varying socio-demographic characteristics with respect to age, marital status (widow or not), number of children, and level of education. Interviews were conducted with mothers-in-law, daughters-in-law, and other family members, including males.

Because of the original objectives of the fieldwork, all middle and old age women in the sample were mothers-in-law. Therefore, this article does not address the lives of childless middle and old age women whose experiences would probably differ considerably from those of women with grown sons (Cain 1986). Also, the target population was further restricted to daughters-in-law who were equal to or younger than 30 years old. Finally, all personal names used are pseudonyms.

Rural Life and Women

Traditional norms and values largely regulate a rural woman's life. One traditional norm that continues to influence a woman's life is the strict division of labor based on gender. While a man typically generates income for the family outside the household, a woman is expected to take care of meal preparation, house cleaning, childcare and most other domestic activities that take place in the extended family compound referred to as the *bari*. Since these tasks do not directly generate income, a woman must depend on a man, whether it be her father, husband, or son, throughout her entire life for economic support (Cain 1982). Another traditional norm influencing a woman's life is the institution of *pardah*, a social custom that limits the visibility and mobility of a woman outside the home. When males or strangers are present in the domestic setting, a woman is also expected to cover herself as an expression of diffidence and self-respect

(Aziz 1985:64). *Purdah* also ensures a strict observance of modest and submissive behavior (Kabeer 1988:101).

A woman's status as a wife or mother represents her only real option for social promotion especially since she is excluded from the public sphere (Dixon 1978). It is important that the family functions well because it is the principal unit with which an individual identifies and receives support (Davis and Blake 1956:215; Mannan 1989:71). After marriage, a woman usually goes to live in her husband's household. Here, she is evaluated based on how properly she devotes herself to its function and the well being of its members. She is also expected to have children, particularly sons because they are essential for maintaining the integrity of a household. It is evident that the fertility behavior of young women is largely influenced by a strong cultural preference for sons (Bairagi and Chowdhury 1994; Nosaka 2000). Compared to daughters, sons represent dependable economic assets and sources of future security because they will generate income for the household economy and remain with their parents to support them. Through sons, therefore, a woman not only gains social recognition, but she also establishes a secure position in the household (Foner 1984:77).

The culturally respected status of household management and child rearing represent an important basis of security for a rural woman. Her resources seldom include wealth and material possessions because her household is usually poor and contains few if any economic assets she controls outright. As a result, although compliance is the principal power resource she has throughout her life, knowledge and experience are typically her most valuable and effective ones. Successful household management permits her to develop these resources thereby increasing her status as "experienced wife" and "successful mother." Thus provisioned, she gains familial respect and enhances her influence and ability to acquire the consent of those around her.

While a rural woman's familial demeanor evolves as she becomes older because her power resources change, it is also largely institutionalized in that she is expected to accept the norms and values defining her behavior at each stage of life. It is usually too risky for a woman to step outside institutionalized norms although cases of deviation do occur. Individuals most constrained by normative expectations include a young wife or an old, frail woman because compliance is usually the only resource they have. If such a woman does not follow the behaviors expected of her, then she risks negative sanctions by other family members and neighbors, and may even lose her means of familial security. Thus, she is most likely to adhere to socially valued behaviors in order that her status be met with approval and her position in the family remain fixed.

The Young Wife

A rural woman typically marries while she is in her teens (Aziz 1985:58; Ellickson 1988:62; Rahman 1993:6; Shaikh 1982:26). When a young wife first moves in she is expected to perform all of the house chores but she rarely knows how to do them exactly the way they must be done in her new household. She also has no experience raising her own children. In contrast, her mother-in-law has considerable opinionated knowledge and experience in both of these areas. Consequently, the relationship between a young wife and her mother-in-law is typically unbalanced. A young daughter-in-law is expected to submissively follow the lead of her mother-in-law who is socially recognized as the one in charge of instructing and supervising the younger female family members. For example, it was common to see a mother-in-law directing a young woman in the proper way to sweep or spread beans or chilies on a mat to dry.

Regima, who had been married for three years, admitted that her 50 year-old mother-in-law still supervised her principal daily activities. Each day, her mother-in-law would clean the yard, care for the goats and cows, and look after her grandchildren, but she seldom took part in cooking. Meal preparation is one of the most time consuming domestic tasks especially if the family is large. Regima usually prepared all of the household meals according to the specific wishes of her mother-in-law.

Purdah further promotes an unbalanced relationship between a young daughter-in-law and her husband's family members. While all women are expected to observe *purdah*, strict adherence to it is mandatory for a young wife. Not only her visibility and mobility should be kept minimal, but she should also be obedient to her husband and parents-in-law, and refrain from expressing her desires or making requests (Aziz 1985:62-68). Consequently, a young wife is rarely involved in household decision-making (Chowdhury 1995:38), being left instead to comply with the decisions of others. Most young women said that they seldom expressed what they believed the household needed. They even had little influence over the meal plans even though they were expected to do most of the cooking. Since proper women are not supposed to go out in public, the father-in-law, husband, or grown sons usually shop for the food in the market. Most daughters-in-law said that they seldom made requests to the men for particular food items because such forward behavior was considered indecorous.

The compliance of a young wife is highly institutionalized. All young daughters-in-law admitted that they would not leave the *bari* unless their husbands, mothers-in-law, and/or fathers-in-law gave them permission. One daughter-in-law who had been married for two and a half years said that she did not even request permission to leave the *bari*; she only left when her parents-in-law made arrangements for her to do so. She said, "It is not right for me to make such a request. It does not bother me to wait until my parents-in-law decide that I can leave the *bari*. They know when the time is right"

Sometimes a young woman will chose to deviate from the behavior society expects of her even though compliance is the norm. For example, one man said that his sister and her young daughter left her husband shortly after he acquired a second wife. Although the vast majority of Bangladeshi men today are monogamous, Islamic laws do permit a man to have multiple wives. In this case, however, this woman could not tolerate living with her husband's second wife despite the cultural expectation that she submit to the new household arrangement. She was working in a garment factory at the time and relied on her brother and his wife to care for her daughter. In another case, one woman returned to her natal family a few months after her marriage because she and her in-laws could not get along. Her angrily exasperated mother-in-law said, "She just left. It has been 3 months. I do not know whether she will be back." In this case, given the behavior expected of the daughter-in-law, her departure appears to have been a clear insult to the mother-in-law. These examples not only represent young wives rebelling against cultural expectations, but they also reflect the challenge they face trying to reach a mutually desirable agreement with their husbands or dominant relatives. It is hard for them to negotiate in difficult familial situations because they have few valued resources and the pressure for them to submit is strongly institutionalized. Consequently, a woman's refusal to comply with any exchange rate set by her husband or in-laws often forces her to terminate the relationship.

While the power of a young wife is usually limited, there are cases where they can successfully fulfill their wishes. Shahida explained that two years after she was married she gave birth to her first child, a daughter. Afterwards, she said that her husband immediately began to pressure her to have a second child because he wanted a son. Although her husband was against

waiting and did not want her to use contraceptives, she insisted, emphasizing the importance of having an adequate amount of time between children. Shortly after their daughter was born she was able to convince him and subsequently used contraceptives for three years before deciding to try to get pregnant again.

It is important to emphasize here that although this example demonstrates a measure of power for a young wife, issues concerning fertility control must be understood differently from other types of behavior. Bangladeshi fertility has changed considerably over the last 30 years. In 1970s, the country's total fertility rate was 7, but it was reduced to 3.1 between 1995 and 2000 (Human Development Report 2000). This phenomenon is the result of strong government support in favor of increasing the availability of modern contraceptives (see Larson and Mitra 1992; Nag 1992 for details). Today, most Bangladeshi people even in rural areas understand the significance of contraceptives and young women of reproductive age are aggressively encouraged to understand the importance of using them. Many rural women are fully aware of the difficulties associated with supporting many children and sending them to school. They also understand that proper birth spacing is vital for ensuring a mother's good health. These concerns have promoted widespread contraceptive use and conscious fertility control is now becoming an important new cultural orientation.

Young women of reproductive age are likely to be more familiar with fertility control and contraceptive use than their mothers-in-law because the introduction of these ideas is relatively recent. Also, compared to men, they know more about these topics because they often talk about them with one another and with government-hired female workers who regularly visit homes to distribute and promote contraceptives. Women of reproductive age appear to be undeniably influenced by these discussions. Many current and former contraceptive users said that they had decided to use them because of recommendations by their neighbors and female relatives or contraceptive distributors. It should be emphasized that their mothers-in-law and husbands may still influence their reproductive behavior even though these women know more about fertility regulation. Compared to traditional behavioral expectations, however, young wives are less likely to be compliant about issues related to fertility.

Many young daughters-in-law often said that, "My mother-in-law does not say anything about contraceptives," or "My mother-in-law and I do not (or did not) converse about the issue." Some of the young interviewees also expressed the belief that their mothers-in-law would never suggest that they stop using contraceptives. Mothers-in-law frequently demonstrated a neutral attitude towards contraceptives taken to mean that they neither opposed nor encouraged their daughters-in-law to use them. Even women who did not approve of fertility control were generally reluctant to express it. Sufia actively directed her daughter-in-law's household activities but kept her negative opinion about contraception to herself. She claimed that, "It is not my business to make decisions about young people's contraceptive use. This is up to my son and daughter-in-law. My daughter-in-law seems to know much more than I do about contraceptives, so I chose to say nothing." This example is important because it represents an interaction between women of different generations that revolves around power resources based on knowledge and experience associated with contraceptive use. In this area the tables are turned and the superior knowledge the daughter-in-law has about contraception creates a situation of passive compliance by the mother-in-law that goes against the traditional structure of their relationship.

In contrast, husbands are likely to be more involved in the issues related to fertility regulation. One young woman admitted that after she had her first child, she had received a

contraceptive injection without her husband's consent. When he found out about it, he was very angry and forbid her from getting any further injections. Furthermore, this example turned tragic when the child died and her husband placed the blame on the injection that she had received. Fortunately, by the time she was interviewed she had three sons and was using pills according to the approval and recommendation of her husband.

Like Shahida (mentioned above), some contraceptive users said that their husbands had not initially agreed with their decision to them. In many cases, however, they were eventually able to obtain the approval of their husbands by discussing the importance of fertility control. Shahida even convinced her husband that they should have only two children so they could provide them with adequate food and educational opportunities. She believed her natal home environment was particularly difficult because she had grown up with two brothers and four sisters. At the time of the interview, she was trying to get pregnant again but she expressed no intention of trying once more for a son even if her second child turned out to be a daughter like her first. When asked whether her husband agreed with her, she replied, "My husband would not oppose."

These examples may indicate the establishment of a new pattern of relationships among young wives and their family members according to an emerging emphasis on fertility control. This appears to be true despite a continued adherence other traditional normative values. Compared to most of their behavior, many young wives are relatively independent when it comes to decisions about their fertility. It is possible that the relative independence a young wife has in this particular realm from the influence of her mother-in-law will carry on into the future. One quantitative study in rural Bangladesh has revealed a correlation between young married women's contraceptive use and a positive attitude their mothers-in-law have towards contraception; this correlation was weakest in an area with an exceptionally high level of contraceptive prevalence (Nosaka 1997, 1998). This suggests that the reproductive behavior of young women may become more independent of their mothers-in-law as contraceptives continue to become more widely available. It would seem that under these conditions mothers-in-law would also gain knowledge and experience about fertility and contraception. According to traditional Bangladeshi norms, this information would equip them with the ability to aggressively direct the fertility behavior of their daughters-in-law. However, in most cases this does not appear to be happening. Indeed, contraceptives have been prevalent in Matlab for more than 30 years. Consequently, many mothers-in-law today may accept the independence of their daughters-in-law concerning fertility control because that was the way it was with their mothers-in-law a generation ago. If this pattern persists then it may become institutionalized.

The Transition to Middle Age

A woman begins to gain power in the family when she has her first child. Women who had successfully borne children said that they felt as though they had established a relatively secure position in the household. Child bearing not only immediately raises one's self-esteem, but it also represents a significant contribution that a woman can make to her household. This is especially the case if she has had any sons. Furthermore, after several years of marriage a woman is able to carry out many of the daily household chores without the incessant assistance or supervision of her mother-in-law. By this time she has mastered the knowledge of proper household management, and her mother-in-law's instructions are no longer needed unless a special, traditional, or unfamiliar event takes place. Motherhood status and the accumulation of

experience managing the household will gradually permit a woman to increase her level of behavioral autonomy.

The independence attained by Shefali after six years of marriage is a good example. When she had first moved into her husband's household, her mother-in-law subjected her to rigorous and explicit instructions on how to cook properly. At the time of the interview, however, she explained that she made virtually all decisions about meal preparation although her mother-in-law would still occasionally come to the kitchen and offer opinions or instructions. Shefali also seemed to be confident and comfortable performing the other household activities as she saw fit. Moreover, she admitted that she was free to excuse herself from the *bari* as long as she remained in the village.

Although, most daughters-in-law regardless of age will usually ask their husbands or parents-in-law for permission to leave the *bari*, as time goes on the pressure for them to be veiled will decline, and they will become more mobile and active outside the *bari*. Furthermore, compared to young wives, the behavior of experienced daughters-in-law is no longer strictly suppressed, and they are more likely to voice their opinions. For example, one couple that had been married for 14 years began living with the husband's parents and two brothers when they were first married. After seven years with this arrangement, the wife finally suggested that they set up a separate household because it had become too crowded. By then she was raising four small children and felt that it was necessary to make such a suggestion. Her husband concurred and they immediately established an independent household.

Another telling example of a woman's increasing power came to light during an interview with Rohima, a young childless wife who had been married for only a year and a half. Her senior sister-in-law, Akter, had insisted on sitting next to her when she was questioned. Rohima was expectably very shy and quiet. In contrast, Akter was forward and confident and had been married for more than 10 years and had four children. Many times during the interview Akter would answer the questions before Rohima had a chance. Before clarifying the relationship between the two, the first author thought that Akter was Rohima's mother-in-law although she looked too young for this role. Their mother-in-law, however, had become very old and had long since retired from many of the household activities. It appeared that Akter had comfortably taken on the role of mother-in-law and acquired the power that went with it.

The Middle Age Mother-in-law

A woman normally enters middle age when she has grown or married children (Aziz 1985:85). In Bangladesh she may attain middle-age status as early as her late 30s because many women marry so young. By this time, she has acquired considerable experience raising children and managing a household; when her son marries she becomes "the active head of the domestic realm" (Ellickson 1988:64). In addition, she is no longer bound by strict expectations to observe *purdah* and this permits her with a greater range of mobility than a young woman and enables her to influence the male dominated realm of financial decision making. The principal basis of her power, however, rests on her dominance and supervision of the younger female members in her household. By middle age, the relative freedom and domestic experience a woman has attained provide her with a powerful, socially legitimated position from which she can expect the compliance of her daughter-in-law. As we shall see, however, the conditions associated with the institutionalized low status of women still require that she continue to work very hard.

One result of a middle-aged woman's relative freedom from the restrictions of *purdah* is an ability to move about outside the *bari* (Feldman and McCarthy 1983:952; Aziz 1985:85-87;

Balk 1994:27). This freedom takes the form of more permissive social expectations that are bolstered by the presence of a daughter-in-law under her command. Thus, she can leave the *bari* knowing that there is another able bodied young woman who will do the household chores. Nurjahan was a 39-year-old woman of five grown children -- four females and one male. When her son married three years prior she eventually began visiting many relatives outside the *bari* after she had taught her daughter-in-law to adequately manage the household activities. After one of Nurjahan's daughters gave birth she even stayed at her daughter's place for several days. Nurjahan needed only obtain her husband's permission to enjoy this freedom.

Relative freedom from strict observance of *purdah* also permits a woman with more liberty to express her opinions. Consequently, although male adult members make all the ultimate financial decisions about the household economy, a middle-aged woman does have a measure of influence in these affairs, particularly if it is her grown sons that are in charge. Many middle age women said that they seldom offered their opinions to their husbands but they did feel comfortable making suggestions to their sons. One woman explained that her grown son had planned to buy a showcase to display their collection of knickknacks. She suggested that he refrain because their household was struggling financially at the time. Although the ultimate authority and power to make the decision was her son's, he listened to her advice and decided he would wait and perhaps buy the cabinet at a later date.

Despite greater mobility and a permissive level of participation in male decision-making, a middle-aged woman is most involved in domestic female-based activities. The active and instructive demeanor of a 48 year-old woman named Karuna aptly illustrates the typical daily life of a middle-aged woman. She began her day before sunrise by washing and dirty dishes left from the night before, sweeping the *bari* compound, taking a bath and then praying for 30 minutes. Next, she began preparing breakfast by working alongside her two daughters-in-law ensuring that things were being done properly. Around nine-thirty, she would eat breakfast and immediately begin thinking about lunch because it often required more than two hours to prepare even with her daughters-in-law assisting. Following lunch preparations Karuna would bathe once again prior to eating. In the latter part of the day she usually rested until sunset when she would then carry out the evening prayers. This routine culminated with another round of dinner preparation and its consumption after which she usually went to sleep around nine o'clock.

This example illustrates that a middle age mother-in-law not only supervises her daughter-in-law, but she also prefers to maintain a fairly active level of domestic activity herself. On one hand, it is important for her to ensure the satisfactory performance of all the household activities. For example, a daughter-in-law must have a meal ready by the time her husband returns from work. During an interview with one young woman, her 55-year-old mother-in-law became extremely irritated. She angrily exclaimed, "It is time for my son to be back here, but nothing is ready because my daughter-in-law has been talking!!" Needless to say, this interview was immediately terminated so the daughter-in-law could begin meal preparations. On the other hand, particularly active mothers-in-law can substantially subsidize the duties of some young women. One interviewee explained that she was rarely busy because her mother-in-law continued to do most of the household chores (indeed, during this interview the young woman's mother-in-law was cooking). When her mother-in-law was asked about the accuracy of her daughter-in-law's response, she laughed aloud and simply said, "I like working."

The voluntary contribution of physical labor provided by a middle-age woman can be understood as an institutionalized strategy that minimizes the decline in her power resources. If her daughter-in-law takes complete charge of the household activities, then her contributions will

be limited to verbal instructions. A middle-aged woman's position in the household remains strongest if she makes significant contributions of physical labor and directs the activities of her younger family members. This permits the cumulative acquisition of additional respect and approval from her household members. Consequently, it is instrumental in her ability to maintain a more powerful position over her daughter-in-law who is gradually rising in status by accumulating knowledge and experience. The respect and approval acquired by a middle age woman via voluntary labor contributions represents the procurement of valuable resources that she may need to rely on down the road. When she becomes primarily dependent on her family members as her abilities decline, the potency of these intangible resources may to some degree dampen the rapid deterioration in her familial position. In general, a woman has few tangible resources (i.e. economic valuables and titles to the land or house) with which she can compensate her family when her physical competency begins to fade. The institutionalized investment a middle-aged woman makes in the accumulation of approval and respect for her domestic abilities is often extremely important for her future.

The Old-Age Woman

The familial power and influence enjoyed by most rural Bangladeshi women only lasts for a short time. When a woman reaches her middle to late 50's she begins to relinquish her traditional responsibilities (Aziz 1985:88). This transitional period is typically associated with a woman's gradual retirement from the role of the principal household manager, the death of her husband, and a general decline in her physical or mental capabilities. It is during this time that her daughter-in-law emerges as the prominent domestic figure and her son becomes the main generator of family income while her aging husband, if he is still alive, gradually loses his economic vitality. Thus, a woman becomes increasingly more marginalized as her younger family members become economically and behaviorally independent.

The life of an old rural Bangladeshi woman is generally quiet and subdued. The daily activities of a 61 year-old woman named Amena illustrate a typical case. She usually awoke around 5 o'clock to pray and then fed the chickens and watered the plants. The rest of the day she was free to do as she pleased because these morning activities were the only things she habitually performed. Occasionally, Amena would weave mats and baskets, or do other chores such as grinding spices and cutting vegetables. She would only help with the cooking when her daughter-in-law was very busy. At the time of the interview, her daughter-in-law had been married for seven years and knew how to manage the daily household activities. Although Amena occasionally gave instructions to her daughter-in-law, in general her advice was only requested during special occasions.

The death of a woman's husband often has a drastic affect on her familial status. Recent statistics on the Matlab area indicated that 56.4% of women aged 45 and above were widowed, while only 5.9% of men of the same age were widowers (Rahman 1993:6). The onset of widowhood is an event that usually marks the time when a woman's son will become the head of the household. Consequently, she formally relinquishes her position of spouse of the household head to her daughter-in-law and essentially becomes her son's economic dependent (Ellickson 1988:67; Rahman 1993:28). Although her husband's death may not immediately do away with her power-base, it often substantially subdues her influence and credibility (Cain et al. 1979:423).

Widows are likely to be very passive. Majeda was a 61 years old woman who had been a widow for 12 years when she was interviewed. Although she managed to leave the village for a

week three or four times a year, she admitted that her physical health was in decline. On the one hand, her son and daughter-in-law continued to interact with her on a relatively frequent basis. Her daughter-in-law would request her permission to leave the *bari* and often asked what she should prepare for a meal. Also, her son frequently asked for her advice about managing the household economy. On the other hand, Majeda admitted that she rarely objected to their plans or suggestions. She emphasized that since her husband died, she kept a low profile to ensure that she maintained positive interactions with her younger family members. She seemed satisfied with her status, and said that, "I am not physically strong, but I am happy with my life."

The loss of physical and mental capabilities can also further compromise an older woman's familial status (Maxwell 1986). A low level of physical competence limits behavioral autonomy and makes one reliant on others for assistance (Collopy 1988). Frailty also inhibits a woman's ability to acquire new knowledge or to effectively use the knowledge she has to instruct or influence others. A simultaneous decline in mental capabilities such as memory will only exacerbate a woman's loss of power further because it increases her dependency. Some daughters-in-law explained that their mothers-in-law were so old or ill that they rarely consulted with them about anything. Mariom, who had been married for 11 years, expressed an explicit independence from her frail 71 year-old mother-in-law. She claimed that she made all daily household decisions herself and seldom requested her husband's opinion. Although Mariom would ask her husband for permission to leave the *bari*, she never consulted with her mother-in-law about this issue. In essence, a woman's physical and mental capabilities are fundamental to the preservation of her prominent household position because she has few if any economic assets that can compensate for the loss of such resources (Cain 1991).

Eventually, the characteristics associated with the aging process leave most older women essentially powerless and compliant. These results are often associated with increasingly lower levels of familial interaction. Joleka was a 77 year-old widow who did not require physical assistance from her two daughters-in-law living in her household but she moved slowly and looked very old. Praying three times a day was her major activity: 10 or 15 minutes before sunrise, 10 or 15 minutes between noon and one o'clock, and one hour during sunset. She also occasionally cared for the children and fed the goats. Joleka looked forward to visits from her three daughters, each of whom came to her *bari* every six months. But, overall her daily interactions with other adult family members were few. At the time, her oldest daughter-in-law who had been married for 14 years expressed open independence from Joleka because of her confident capacity as the primary household manager. She said, "Today, I handle all work without asking my mother-in-law's permission or advice. When want to leave the *bari*, I ask permission from my husband; my mother-in-law will not object if it is alright with him."

It is typical for older rural women in Bangladesh to consciously acknowledge their passive demeanor. For example, Fatema was a 60 year-old widowed woman who expressed a comfortable indifference to any involvement in household decisions. At the time of the interview, she explained that her household had multiple sources of income. Although her youngest son was a student, her oldest one was a shopkeeper and her second oldest was employed in a foreign country. Fatema said she no longer needed to participate in household decisions because her sons had more experience with the modern world than she did. Many old women like Fatema said that they accepted their quiet, dependent status and freely admitted that they were too old to continue directing or influencing the behavior of their younger family members.

Although the foregoing is the normative pattern, the loss of an older woman's power and influence can be dampened if she has successfully garnered respect for her earlier domestic efforts. Acknowledgement of substantial familial contributions can permit a woman to maintain a relatively high level of respect despite becoming widowed and dependent. The younger family members of these individuals may feel indebted and gain a sense of satisfaction by providing them with obligatory respect and security. But this pattern also seems to be largely associated with women fortunate enough to still have fairly sound physical capacities. At 62 years old, Lalmati is a good example of a woman who appeared healthy and strong compared to other women her age. She was also forthrightly proud of her physical condition. She explained that although her daughter-in-law usually performed most of the household activities, she was more than able to take over whenever her daughter-in-law was absent from the *bari*. Lalmati even occasionally encouraged her daughter-in-law to visit her natal parents because she was quite confident in her abilities. In addition, she would go on lengthy eight to ten day trips three or four times a year to visit her relatives. Lalmati took these trips frequently because she was not solely responsible for any household work. Since her husband had died the year before, she no longer needed to ask anyone for permission to leave the *bari*. When she wanted to go on trip she just informed her son and then left. In her mind, she had gained even power and autonomy as she became older despite the death of her husband.

Begum illustrates another interesting example of an old woman with a relatively powerful position who actually experienced a rise in her economic status as she became older. She was a healthy looking 75 year-old widow whose son had already established a successful business when her husband died 15 years ago. After her husband's death, her son became the principal household economic decision maker but Begum felt free to voice her opinions about anything if she pleased. She was clearly proud of her earlier household contributions and emphasized that they were the reason she had been able to raise successful sons. Begum also asserted that she continued to have considerable power over economic decisions. For example, she often could dissuade her son from purchasing something that was too expensive or unnecessary. She said, "When I tell him something is not worth buying, he will not buy it."

Both Lalmati and Begum were widowed and *de facto* dependent on the economic support of their sons. This condition could have placed them in passive and powerless positions; however, they did not have to resort to compliance to the degree that other women with similar conditions must do. They maintained relatively comfortable positions because they will still physically functional and/or were acknowledged for their earlier exceptional contributions to the household.

A position of power and influence based on physical capacity or respect for one's previous contributions is unlikely to maintain its potency forever (Maxwell 1986). Inevitably, a woman's physical and mental capabilities will decline making her increasingly more of a dependent burden on her family. The typical passivity of most old women in rural Bangladesh indicates such a dependence. Once again, exchange theory predicts that when the power resources of two individuals are not balanced, the one with more sets the rate of exchange (Dowd 1975). The one with less power must accept this rate if he/she is dependent on the resources gained by the interaction. Thus, an old Bangladeshi woman adopts a strategic institutionalized demeanor of quiet compliance to maintain her security by minimizing possible interpersonal friction. Consequently, her inert, reserved behavior also ultimately results in behavioral isolation from her family members despite the fact that she lives with them. This burdensome quality of

existence is a tragic reflection of the desperate socio-economic conditions prevalent throughout rural Bangladesh.

Ironically, the misery associated with the lives of older women in rural Bangladesh may be getting worse because of recent worldwide trends in medicine and health care. One result of these trends has been the increase in Bangladeshi longevity. Life expectancy at birth was estimated to be 44.9 years between 1970 and 1975, but was recently reported to be 58.1 years between 1995 and 2000 (Human Development Report 2000). During this latter period, 63.1 percent of the people in Bangladesh were expected to live to at least to 60 years of age. Although increases in longevity are rightfully regarded as progressive, given the quick tempo at which rural Bangladeshi women still pass through their respective life stages, this phenomenon is now expanding the length of time many of them must endure the institutionalized hardships of old age status. In other words, they must experience a great amount of time in a powerless and isolated state of being. Furthermore, their powerlessness and isolation may become even more marked because the longer they live in an increasingly dependent capacity, the greater the stress on their younger family members.

It is possible that the advances in medicine and health care will aid in prolonging not only longevity but also one's functional capacity on both a physical and mental level. This result would act to temper the misery associated with prolonging old age life. Clearly, physically strong women like Lalmati can remain relatively prominent because their functional capacity permits them to continue contributing labor to the household. For most older rural Bangladeshi women, however, the magnitude of any such changes will probably not be enough to offset the harsh conditions pervasive in the society. Consequently, the current dynamic shaping the institutionalized quality of female powerlessness in rural Bangladesh still appears to represent a comparatively dismal situation. Although emergent fertility control in a woman's early reproductive years represents a new source of empowerment absent in the traditional normative culture, it seems that they still may suffer later in life because of the prolonged period of isolation and passivity typically associated with old age.

Summary and Conclusions

The status of most human beings changes according to the different social roles they have during their lives. Degrees of change and the institutional structures framing this universal trait, however, vary cross-culturally. The comparative nature of anthropology as a discipline allows us to define this variation and understand it in terms of cultural context. The foregoing discussion has examined the nature of traditional social institutions that undermine the status of rural Bangladeshi women, and areas in which this cultural pattering now appears to be changing. It has employed the perspective of exchange theory to understand how the overall low status of these women shifts over the life course according to the social expectations surrounding institutionalized family relationships.

Compared to many modern societies, the power and influence that a rural Bangladeshi woman has available to her are relatively limited. When she is very young she is undervalued because there is a preference for sons in the society (Arnold 1992; Bhuiya and Streatfield 1991; Chen et al. 1981). As a young wife, she can acquire power although initially her behavior is largely dependent on the wishes of other adult household members, especially the directives of her mother-in-law. This dependency is the result of the limited resources she has relative to her new family members, and because she must observe the strict rules associated with the institution of *pardah*. A newly married woman is essentially marooned in an uncertain

environment with no means of bargaining except absolute compliance; this is her only real power resource. She must begin her ascent up the ladder of status via her role as a mother. Her status comes from successfully bearing and raising children, and by gaining experience managing the household. Indeed, the life of a barren wife in rural Bangladesh must be an absolutely dismal existence, especially those who end up deferring to a second wife who is able to bear children.

By the time a woman enters middle age she has generally established a familial power base founded on domestic accomplishments. She is also no longer bound by the behavioral restrictions placed on a young wife. Early middle age represents, therefore, the period during which a woman enjoys her greatest measure of influence enabling her to interact with younger family members in a more aggressive and direct manner. During this life stage, a few women are also able to accumulate power resources that will cushion the decline in their status usually associated with the onset of old age. Typically, such power comes from respect and recognition that their younger family members have for their earlier contributions to the current household level of social and economic prosperity.

When a middle-age woman becomes older her power base will begin to diminish relative to the resources held by her younger family members. This is usually inversely proportional to the power resources her daughter-in-law gains from experience in the domestic sphere. When an older woman's husband dies, she loses her status as wife of the household head to her daughter-in-law and becomes economically dependent on her son. Such events also tend to coincide with a progressive loss of her physical strength and/or mental capacity, in addition to declining self-esteem. As a consequence, an aging woman is usually invisible and behaves passively when interacting with her family. Thus, a rural Bangladeshi woman has few if any real options for acquiring the limited power resources that are available to her. Her campaign must play out within the family; she is essentially restricted to a domestic mode of empowerment where her advancements are achieved and ephemeral.

Much of the foregoing discussion indicates that the traditional institutions defining the lives of rural Bangladeshi women appear to be relatively unchanging.⁴ The authors have stressed, however, some social phenomena that were not prevalent as recently as 20 years ago. The issue of a young woman's control over her fertility is one example. Fertility control was not a factor before the idea of fertility regulation was introduced and modern contraceptives became widely available. Female fertility, therefore, was neither an issue of whether or when a woman would have a child, nor a question of who would make these decisions. In contrast, today many people accept the idea of fertility regulation and contraceptive use. What is interesting is that fertility decisions appear to fall largely in the hands of a young wife. This is a departure from the traditional pattern where a woman's mother-in-law and/or husband had control over virtually all of her behavior. It indicates a dynamic social component at work in the society where, at least with respect to fertility, a young woman now has some measure of decision making power that her older female family members did not enjoy when they were young. To some degree, fertility control appears to be altering the traditional institutional pattern of intra-family relationships.

Another recent change discussed in this study is the increase in overall longevity in Bangladesh that is prolonging the length of time old rural women must endure the powerlessness, passivity, and isolation associated with old age. The longer most older women live, the less they will be able to physically contribute to the household and the more burdensome they will become to their younger family members. This threatens to increase the level of stress already experienced by poor families in the rural countryside. Such a development will probably not bring about significant changes in the traditional family institutions defining a

woman's status in old age but it does directly affect the long-term quality of her life. Furthermore, we wish to stress that life is hard for rural Bangladeshi people, especially the poorest families with members who are old and incapacitated. If it gets significantly harder, then some form of social change will be inevitable; it may create a demand for state institutions that can help care for the older population, a role that is traditionally carried out by the extended family.

Future research is needed to see how fertility control and the increase in longevity will affect social changes in the lives of rural Bangladeshi women. Decisions about fertility control may remain in the hands of young women as it is in many other parts of the world. It is also possible, however, that within a generation fertility decisions may be taken over by mothers-in-law who are currently contraceptive users. They may use their experience to control or influence the fertility regulation of their future daughters-in-law. The increase in longevity may result in pressure on the state to provide more support for a growing old age population, the majority of which will probably be women. Knowing how such developments influence the familial interactions and roles of these Bangladeshi women will enhance our comprehensive understanding of how traditional societies are changing in the face of the modern world.

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² Although this discussion uses the words "traditional" and "modern," the exaggerated stereotypes sometimes associated with this dichotomy are not intended (see Djao, 2002). To the contrary, it demonstrates the social heterogeneity of people that maintain, or live according to, traditions specific to their culture, but also they have come under the influence of some Western concepts and technologies. These western influences are not necessarily viewed as advantageous. Moreover, there is no intent to suggest that "traditional" women are "ignorant," "uneducated," or "victimized" as opposed to their western, "modern" counterparts that have been characterized as "sophisticated," "educated," or "controlling" (see Mohanty, 1991b). The purpose of this study is to focus on both the static and dynamic nature of women's lives in a specific socio-cultural and historic context (see Mohanty, 1991a).

³ Fieldwork by the primary author focused on contraceptive behavior and the familial relationships, particularly between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. Given this emphasis, the primary author did not target the collection of first-hand information on micro-finance institutions and their influence on the power struggle between men and women. The authors do not maintain that familial interactions among women play out independent of the culturally based concerns, expectations, and mandates of male family members. Consequently, male behavior relevant to the main topic of this article is discussed in the text where appropriate.

⁴ Not emphasized in this article, besides changes brought about by recent fertility behavior (e.g., contraception) and increased longevity, the involvement of rural women in micro-finance programs is also a factor affecting change in the traditional social fabric. These programs lend minimal amounts of capital at low rates of repayment that are typically used to begin and maintain small-scale economic enterprises. On one hand, generating income and making economic decisions have been strictly male "business" in Bangladesh. Consequently, many men stubbornly resist cash-generating activities associated with household decision-making on the part of women. Indeed, a study by Goetz and Gupta (1996) suggests that more than 60 percent of female borrowers do not significantly control the transactions associated with their loans; in these cases, control falls predominantly in the hands of husbands or other male family members. Also, young married women closely supervised by aggressive mothers-in-law probably have the least control, whereas their older married counterparts have greatest control (Goetz and Gupta 1996). In addition, women who do have substantial command over their assets usually invest in activities such as livestock and poultry rearing in and around the *bari*; traditionally, these activities have been ascribed to women (Goetz and Gupta 1996; Hashemi et al. 1996). Hence, even though micro-finance programs have allowed women to enter the male-dominated cash economy, for many, true monetary control is still largely structured according to traditional norms, specifically the gender division of labor, *purdah*, and intra-family relationships. On the other hand, numerous women have successfully established themselves through such programs. Even though control by some women over their loans and investment activities is limited and their contributions remain undervalued, those who participate generally have more economic and decision making power in the household and are more conscious about political matters and active in public events (Hashemi et al. 1996). One study even suggests that these programs have increased contraceptive use because they often reinforce many of the values promoted by family

planning programs (Schuler et al. 1997). Further investigation is required to examine how significantly micro-finance programs have affected relatively low status young wives and old widows, and how such programs will continue to promote a broad movement of female empowerment. Nevertheless, similar to family planning, micro-finance has provided women with opportunities that were not available a few decades ago.