



“Your father is no more”: Insights on guardianship and abandonment from ultrapoor women heads of household in Bangladesh



Jenny Munro^a, Patrick B. Patterson^b, Lynn McIntyre^{b,*}

^a State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program, Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, College of Asia & the Pacific, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

^b Dept. of Community Health Sciences, Cumming School of Medicine, Teaching Research & Wellness (TRW Building), University of Calgary, Calgary, AB T2N 4Z6, Canada

ARTICLE INFO

Available online xxxx

SYNOPSIS

This qualitative study explores the views of 43 ultrapoor women heads of household to highlight the significance of male guardianship in the context of legal ordinances and modernizing trends in Bangladesh. Widows described how the absence of a husband led to shaming and stigmatization while the presence of a non-provider husband as guardian, despite a drain on household resources, was seen as desirable. Abandoned and divorced wives revealed that the husband and his lineage severed all relationships with their children, a finding that scholars have yet to explore in the Bangladesh context. Norms, both legal and cultural, shape women's preference for a male guardian but their experiences also lead to their questioning of the guardian role. Future work should be directed at understanding why ultrapoor men walk away from traditional roles, while legal reforms and social policies are needed to address the vulnerabilities of abandoned women and children.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Marriage is an all-encompassing social, cultural, religious and legal institution in Bangladesh that has powerful, but we would argue, often overlooked, effects on women's lives and livelihoods (McIntyre, Thille & Hatfield, 2013). Nearly all women in Bangladesh marry (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2010), and there is no genuine alternative for women other than marriage (Bhuiya & Chowdhury, 1997; Salway, Jesmin, & Rahman, 2005). Discussions about marriage in Bangladesh and in South Asia in general tend to focus on early age of marriage (Desai & Andrist, 2010; Maertens, 2013), stigmatization of widows and divorced women (Desai & Banerji, 2008), and empowering and disempowering gender relations (Ganguly-Scrase, 2003; Magar, 2003). Yet the dominant idiom for marriage is guardianship (White, 2013) by males toward

women and children, and this idea and its practice remain underexplored in the context of extreme poverty.

Most of what we know about marital dynamics and experiences in highly disadvantaged Bangladeshi households has focused on the way poor married women and men relate to one another in the context of development activities or poverty-reduction efforts. The aid program lens views wives and husbands as competing for resources and authority, perhaps in relation to development interventions (Ahmed, 2008; Haque & Kusakabe, 2005; Matin & Hulme, 2003). This perspective does not provide sufficient insight into the way that family dynamics and household member views are shaped by social processes in a rapidly-changing society. Development agendas and policies aimed at improving the lives of ultrapoor women and men, including the Millennium Development Goals, have paid too little attention to the private sphere of the household (McIntyre, Thille & Hatfield, 2013), especially understandings and effects of marital practices, values and structures. Marital relations also assume a particular

* Corresponding author.

importance given that the ultrapoor in Bangladesh are not only characterized by a lack of economic resources, but also by exclusion from important social ties (McIntyre & Munro, 2013; Hossain, 2005).

In this paper, we enter the private sphere of marital gender relations to examine women heads of household's views on guardianship and child abandonment in relation to their marital structure.¹ We draw on a qualitative study with 43 Bangladeshi ultrapoor (defined as earning less than 1 USD per day) female heads of household living with dependent children. This demographic is disproportionately represented among the 26.6 million people living in ultrapoverly in Bangladesh (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2010), and previous research has documented that these women receive very little to no government or non-government assistance (McIntyre & Munro, 2013). During the study we observed that husbands who abandoned or divorced them also severed all relationships with both their boy and girl children, as did his relatives. Fathers' abandonment of, particularly, their male children, remains undocumented and underexplored in the context of patriarchy and patrilineal descent in South Asia. Bangladesh, despite a constitutional commitment to gender equality, is highly patriarchal and well-known for son preference. According to patrilineal traditions in Bangladesh, affirmed and enacted in a patriarchal society, children belong to their father and his extended family in cultural, social and legal ways (Ball & Wahedi, 2010; Hossain, 2003).

Through an examination of ultrapoor women's experiences of, and views on, guardianship and abandonment, we show the significant effects of guardianship and its absence on ultrapoor women and their children. In doing so we highlight the significance of male guardianship in the context of legal codes² and modernizing trends in Bangladesh. We demonstrate that although women are critical of some aspects of marital norms, they remain largely committed to traditional roles and values. Interviews revealed pervasive hardships – food insecurity, competing basic needs, worry, and lack of formal or informal assistance (McIntyre & Munro, 2013; McIntyre et al., 2011). Widows, not unexpectedly, provided accounts of disadvantage and exclusion. Participants living with dependent husbands offered interesting insights into the value of guardianship as a reflection of both traditional values and modernizing trends. The women whose marriages ended through divorce or abandonment described themselves as 'abandoned' – a designation that extended to their children. Insights on guardianship and abandonment from women's lived experiences thus demonstrate how household gender relations, marital values, and state structures regarding marriage and children contribute to poverty and exclusion.

Guardianship in cultural, legal, and economic contexts in Bangladesh

Guardianship is defined as the duty of males to provide for dependents. It is an important marital concept in Bangladesh (Chen, 1986; Tamanna, 2013). Chen (1986:218) notes that, 'the leader of a kinship group is expected to give legal counsel and defence, provide social support and security, and gain command over and distribute resources'. White (2013) has argued that Bangladeshi husbands are normatively described as family-centered, hardworking, of good character, free of harmful

addictions and extramarital affairs. In contrast, Samuel (2011) and other researchers (Blanchet, Biswas, & Lucky, 2001; Kotlová, 1993) have suggested that male guardians (fathers, husbands, and sons) are expected to exert authority over the women for whom they are responsible; hence male violence toward wives is regarded as acceptable and even appropriate, even though it is illegal (Anwary, 2015). Tamanna (2013) argues that the male role as protector is used as a justification for male privileges of polygamy,³ unilateral divorce⁴ and demanding obedience from wives.⁵ Yet the effects of the presence or absence of a male guardian in ultrapoor households remain underexplored. Neither do we know much about how marital breakdown might occur in ultrapoor families.

Practices of guardianship occur in gendered cultural and religious contexts. Ninety percent of the population in Bangladesh is Muslim (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2010) and family norms in Bangladesh are shaped by the *purdah* traditions of the overwhelmingly Muslim population. Norms around *purdah* generate a high degree of female dependence within households, and males are expected to provide for dependents. To be able to provide adequately for one's wife and family is a significant aspect of male honor which receives cultural emphasis in the *purdah* prohibition on women working outside of the house (White, 2013). Women depend on men they are related to, especially their husbands, to act as guardians providing access to land, credit, public services, permission to take wage work and social legitimacy (Chen, 1986; Salway et al., 2005). The constraints on a woman's individual autonomy are reinforced following her marriage because she typically lives in close proximity to her husband's extended family and rarely sees her own parents or siblings (Chen, 1986; Salway et al., 2005).

Exclusively male guardianship extends to children. Hossain (2013) has described the Islamic values that posit the fatherly role as spiritual, material, and educational. Legally, the father has authority over his children and in law children are 'orphaned' if they are fatherless. Custody and guardianship of children differ somewhat in legal rights but a Muslim woman 'is not the natural guardian either of the person or property of the child; the father alone, or if he is dead, his executor is the legal guardian' (Kamal, 2010: 6). Further, a woman may lose custody of her children if she re-marries to someone who is not related to the children by consanguinity (Kamal, 2010, citing Sobhan, 1978).

Debates over the meaning and practice of guardianship are best positioned in relation to rapidly changing cultural social and economic conditions in Bangladesh. Since the 1960s, urbanization has increased at an annual rate of 6% (World Bank, 2007). There is, however, scant research on Bangladesh's changing demographic, social, and environmental contexts with respect to their implications for family dynamics and fathers' roles (Ball & Wahedi, 2010). Other South Asian societies that are highly involved in economic modernization, such as Kerala in southern India, display tendencies toward more nucleated households and emphasize individual agency and personal choice (Osella & Osella, 2000). Economic modernization is associated with changes in family and household structures and the ways that personal identity, including gender preference for children, is construed (Ahmed & Bould, 2004). Thornton and Fricke (1987) note that marital changes related to economic modernization typically benefit men more

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6852937>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6852937>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)