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## **Shifting the Burden to Daughters: A Qualitative Examination of Population Policy, Labor Migration, and Filial Responsibility in Rural Bangladesh**

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**Abstract** This research examines the gendered consequences of the international low-fertility agenda, as it has been realized in an era of a globalized labor market, by documenting some of the ways that families in rural Bangladesh have shifted filial responsibilities between daughters and sons. Such shifts are occurring in a context of new demographic and economic realities that have been largely shaped by national policies and pressure from international organizations. Using qualitative interview data, this study examines how, in the context of declining family size, male labor migration, and increasing life expectancy, women and girls are expected to take on a larger share of filial responsibilities. While sons' responsibilities narrow to include economic contributions through wage earning and remittances, expectations for daughters are expanding and may include earning a wage, as well as caring for both natal and marital relatives. This paper also seeks to problematize the conflation of fertility decline, poverty reduction, and women's well-being by arguing that women's empowerment is not a natural result of smaller families.

**Keywords** Globalization; Development; Family; Gender; Fertility; Population Policy; Bangladesh

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This research demonstrates the gendered consequences of neoliberal development and family planning programs by documenting some of the ways that families in rural Bangladesh orient themselves around new demographic and economic realities; realities that have been largely shaped by national policies. These policies were implemented

over the last forty years by the Government of Bangladesh with support from influential international financial and non-governmental institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Economic research that analyzes women as a stand-alone or homogenous category has been insufficient for assessing the effects of economic and population policies on women and girls in the Global South. Rather than isolate women's status or experiences, this study contextualizes them by foregrounding kinship and family relationships. By doing so, the data presented make visible several local consequences of political and economic changes, and demonstrate how such change carries with it possibilities for perpetuating or deepening gender inequality.

Using care work and filial responsibility as sites for exploring social change, I examine the effects of simultaneous economic and demographic shifts in rural Bangladesh. I examine these shifts through women's perspectives on their current household and filial responsibilities and through parents' discussions of their future expectations for their sons and daughters. Data for this study were collected via household observations, informal conversations, and thirty semi-structured interviews with women in their homes. By focusing on care work and filial responsibility, I endeavor to achieve two goals. The first is to highlight state policies and economic ideologies as factors that shape family and gender relations in rural Bangladesh. The second is to document some of the ways that rural development, linked as it is to global economic change, perpetuates conditions of inequality under which people must renegotiate gender roles within the family.

## Background and Study Area

International organizations cite several recent changes in Bangladesh as evidence of the positive effects of economic development and modernization. These shifts include lower birth rates; increased access to formal education for girls; improvements in life expectancy for men and women; increasing remittance flows from abroad; and a reduced reliance on agriculture with the entrance of men and women into the wage labor system (Cleland et al. 1994; Ahmed 2004; IMF 2013; World Bank 2013; 2014).

This section includes a description of the study area and its connection to current demographic and economic policies. I first describe the Matlab study area in terms of typical patterns of marriage, residence, and care-giving within the family so that readers can better understand the local context in which social changes are occurring. Next, I present a discussion of the low-fertility agenda, locating this research in literature that documents the complexities of women's lived experiences of economic development and population control. This is followed by a brief description of two other policy-driven changes visible in the study area: (1) the out-migration of men who leave the village in search of work and (2) improvements in access to education for all children, but particularly for girls.

### Matlab Study Area

The study site for this research is Matlab, Bangladesh, a rural area about 100 kilometers southeast of the capital city, Dhaka. The area is home to approximately 200,000 people and consists of a few small

towns and approximately 140 villages (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2010; ICDDR, B 2014).

Matlab is the site of a cholera hospital and population research center run by a large NGO, the International Center for Diarrheal Disease Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR, B), which has operated there since the 1960s. The Center has been instrumental in lowering fertility in Matlab over the last 30 years through education programs and ongoing home visits by health outreach workers who promote and offer contraception (Arends-Kuenning 2001). Their outreach activities are held up internationally as an example of a successful, non-coercive fertility reduction program (Cleland et al. 1994). Although fertility rates in most parts of Bangladesh did not begin to decline until the 1980s, rates in the Matlab study area began to decline earlier, from approximately 7 children per woman in the 1960s, dropping below 5 children by the end of the 1970s, to an average of 2.6 children per woman in 2012 (HDSU 2013).

Families in rural Bangladesh are structured such that adult sons and daughters have separate roles that serve distinct purposes in maintaining and reproducing the family. A multi-directional flow of care and resources exists in terms of financial and care-giving responsibilities exchanged between natal and marital households, parent and child generations, and sons and daughters. A majority of families practice patrilocal residence, arranged marriages, and patrilineal inheritance patterns; such family structures are temporally and spatially resilient. Still, the prevalence of normative family structures described here should not be understood as representing a static, “traditional” model of the family in Bangladesh.

The status position of sons in Bangladeshi families has historically been higher than that of daughters (Ahmed and Bould 2004; Kabeer, Huq, and Mahmud 2014). Family residence patterns are patrilocal, which means that boys and girls grow up in their father’s house surrounded by their mother and their paternal relatives. After marriage, sons stay in their natal household with their wives and, when possible, inherit land in their father’s *bari*<sup>1</sup> while married daughters move to their in-laws’ house. Although dowry has been illegal since the 1980s, the vast majority of marriages are still arranged by the bride’s and groom’s parents after they negotiate a dowry (Nasrin 2011).

Daughters-in-law who join the household are expected to take part in agricultural labor, to cook and complete household chores, and to be responsible for the hands-on care of children and elderly relatives. Typically, sons bear the burden of economic security for the family, whether that security is found in working family land, working others’ land in exchange for crops or wages, or performing wage-based labor in town or abroad. Sons are also responsible for shopping and business transactions that take place outside of the household. As work in the village becomes scarce and national policies favor sending men abroad for work, an increasing number of men now migrate to urban centers and abroad for wage-based jobs (Asfar 2009; HDSU 2013). Additionally, as parents have fewer children, it becomes more likely that they will have one son or no sons. This change in the number of children and the increased likelihood that parents will have only

<sup>1</sup> A *bari* is a cluster of household buildings, usually around a central yard area and a shared kitchen/cooking space.

daughters affects residence and care work patterns in important ways.

### **The Low-Fertility Agenda in Rural Bangladesh**

Population control has been an integral part of the national policy agenda in Bangladesh since the early 1970s, with leaders identifying high population density and low income as major challenges to the new nation. Globally, population policies transitioned after the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo (e.g., Richey 2003; Gulati 2005). Prior to the Cairo meeting, approaches focused on reducing fertility via family planning and access to contraception. Post-ICPD approaches are broader in scope. The language of post-ICPD policies demonstrates an attention to gender equity by focusing on girls' and women's health, reproductive health, and even women's empowerment; however, fertility control remains the end goal (Richey 2003; Kabeer 2015).

The low-fertility agenda is highly visible in rural Bangladesh. It is carried out on multiple platforms, including via slogans in the media, advertisements in public places, in children's lessons at school, during celebrations of International Women's Day, and through home visits by health outreach workers employed by governmental and non-governmental organizations. Outreach workers, most of whom are women, visit women of childbearing age to educate them about reproductive health, offer free contraception, and ask them direct questions about their reproductive decisions, sometimes pressuring them to curb their plans for more children. Efforts to control fertility in Bangladesh are a part of

broader national policy goals to relieve poverty and stimulate economic development (IMF 2013). People in the study area discuss fertility reduction as synonymous with ending rural poverty, empowering women, and bolstering development. The conflation of population control, women's empowerment, and development efforts is not unique to the study area; this pattern can be found around Bangladesh and in other countries (e.g., Richey 2003).

The work of well-known economist, Amartya Sen, is reflective of the connections people draw between fertility rates, development, and empowerment. Sen (1996; 1997) positions fertility decline as a solution to many social problems, achievable by empowering individual women, which he believed would, in turn, allow women to make decisions about their reproductive health. Sen (1996) champions cooperative, as opposed to coercive, approaches to fertility reduction as necessary to avoid global environmental crises and to reduce poverty, but he does so without questioning whether low fertility, poverty reduction, and women's empowerment are actually linked in lived experience.

Sen (1997:11) writes that, "One of the most important facts about fertility and family size is that the lives that are most battered by over-frequent childbirth are those of the women who bear the children." He continues this line of reasoning in "Gender Equity and the Population Problem," writing that, "Perhaps the most immediate adversity that is caused by a high rate of growth of population lies in the loss of freedom that young women suffer when they are shackled by persistent bearing and rearing of children" (Sen 2001:471).

Though others have demonstrated rapid fertility decline among the poor is achieved through state-level improvements that increase access to education and social services for everyone in the family (Birdsall and Griffin 1988), Sen (1997) uses the language of post-ICPD policymakers when he, instead, focuses on individual women's empowerment as the best tool for achieving low fertility. His arguments evade larger questions about poverty to purport that childbearing itself causes such suffering that, given more autonomy, young women will decide to have fewer children and their lives will consequently improve. Sen is devoted to the question of *how* we get to population control, never unpacking the assumption that decreasing fertility is automatically or inherently linked with women's well-being.

Research has shown the relationship between lower fertility and women's empowerment to be contextually complex (Simmons 1996; Head 2012). In her study of fertility and empowerment<sup>2</sup> using nationally-representative data from Bangladesh, Sara Head (2012) found no significant improvement in empowerment for women whose fertility rates were below the mean for their community. Head's (2012) findings indicate that women whose cumulative fertility matched the normative rates within their community tended to have the highest empowerment scores. This suggests that bearing the appropriate number of children remains a crucial component of women's value and status within the household and community.

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<sup>2</sup> In Head's study, empowerment is operationalized via four questions that measure women's household decision-making power.

In reality, efforts to decrease fertility have been motivated more by economic concerns than by considerations for women's well-being. The low-fertility agenda has been a long-standing feature of Bangladesh's economic adjustment. Economic and demographic goals are frequently combined in a comprehensive policy framework, outlined in a series of seven five-year plans created by the IMF and the Planning Commission of Bangladesh (IMF 2013; GED 2015). The assumption that curbing fertility is part of successful economic growth rests somewhat on the belief that nations need to dramatically decrease demands for social or welfare programs and increase the population's production potential (Kabeer 1994).

Feminist scholars have been documenting the myriad ways that economic development and fertility policies implemented in African, Latin American, Caribbean, and Asian countries produce new problems and magnify existing gender inequalities, particularly at the family level (Elson 1992; Kabeer 1994; Kibria 1995; Thomas-Emeagwali 1995; Lingam 2006; Connell 2014). Despite hopes that education, low fertility, and participation in the paid labor market would improve women's circumstances, research demonstrates that women who earn wages are often not in control of household resources and are still expected to carry the double burden of paid work and unpaid domestic labor (Elson 1992; Kibria 1995; Chowdhury 2010).

This research examines the family in the context of fertility reduction, labor migration, and other policy-driven shifts in rural Bangladesh in order to document how such shifts, which constitute part of the

development agenda, complicate women's family life and filial responsibilities. What follows is a description of two other aspects of development policy that, in addition to declining fertility, are sources of social change in the study area at present: the overseas export of male labor and the advancement of education for girls.

### **Male Labor Migration and Changes in Education**

The promotion of a domestic and international wage-based labor market is another component of development efforts in the study area. At the national level, the Government of Bangladesh and the IMF have been working to decrease employment in family agriculture, citing hopes to double the percent of the population employed in the industrial sector by 2021 (IMF 2013). Between 2000 and 2010, the number of families without land continued to rise while poverty rates decreased (World Bank 2013). This decoupling of poverty and landlessness is rooted in the move away from agricultural production towards wage-based labor and an increased reliance on remittance sending. Still, meeting the demand for wage-based jobs in rural areas has been difficult. To address this problem, the IMF set a related goal of increasing the rate of overseas employment of all skilled and semi-skilled Bangladeshi workers from the current rate of 35% to 50% by 2021 (IMF 2013). According to study area data collected in 2011, migration rates for men who are leaving villages in search of work in urban areas and abroad are moderate, but increasing among those aged 20-34 years (HDSU 2013). The male out-migration rate in 2011 was 15.2% of men aged 20-24 years, 12.7% of men 25-29 years, and 10.1% of men aged 30-34 years (HDSU 2013).

Changes in education represent another component of rural development. Since the 1990s, national policies have sought to increase accessibility of education for girls, as well as cultural acceptance of allowing them to attend school (Asadullah and Chaudhury 2009). The moderately successful Female Secondary School Stipend Project was developed to increase enrollment of rural girls, which would thereby delay their marriage and childbearing (Schurmann 2009). As the data below demonstrate, most parents I spoke to expect their daughters to complete at least some school.

### **Methods**

Data for this research come from household observations, informal conversations, and thirty semi-structured field interviews with women during the fall and winter of 2011. Field interviews were conducted as part of a larger dissertation project which was ethnographic in nature, taking place across two extended visits to Bangladesh in 2010 and 2011. The larger research project sought to understand recent changes in gender roles and family dynamics amid economic and demographic shifts in rural Bangladesh.

Qualitative methods are an important sociological tool for connecting macro-level changes with experiences at the micro or household level. Qualitative methods also have the potential to detect important changes in social norms and values before those changes are evident in quantitative or outcome-focused models.

The economic development and population policies I contend with in this study can be understood as

national strategies for opening the economy and merging national interests with global ones, referred to as globalization. As a macro-level phenomenon, globalization poses unique challenges to analyzing social and cultural change because it complicates traditional research parameters, such as the meanings of “local” and “field site.” Ethnographic interview research is well-suited for this challenge because it allows a fluidity and flexibility that can be used to interrogate the meanings of the research parameters alongside a pursuit of the research topic. The researcher can simultaneously interrogate policies from above alongside their varied effects on households below. Ethnographic methods are also well-suited for examining global forces because they rely on “being there” in a particular place to understand a particular aspect of social structure as grounded in lived experiences. “Being there” is the best starting point for understanding how global forces, including population policy and the global labor market, intersect with aspects of daily life such as gender roles and filial responsibility.

Another challenge lies in how globalization makes global-local linkages *appear* as though they are chaotic or uncoupled. In response, the ethnographer needs to rethink notions of “field” and boundaries around “place” and “group,” as these concepts are shifting. Sociologists Gille and O’Riain (2002:273) consider the problem of how we understand local spaces and meanings in the context of globalization, writing, “Ethnography is uniquely well-placed to deal with the challenges of studying social life under globalization because it does not rely on fixed and comparable units of analysis.” Likewise, in her introduction to *Constructing the Field*, Vered Amit

(2000) tells us that ethnographic practice is flexible and fluid; the ethnographer can make use of this flexibility and fluidity in order to rethink and re-imagine the meaning of local as it relates to the global.

This project examines households as local sites where global labor markets and population policies come to bear. Kabeer (1994) reminds us that experts, particularly economists, who prescribe development policies know very little about how households are organized in terms of marriage, parent-child relationships, and kinship, and so they have been largely incorrect in their predictions of how structural change would affect women’s lives. Noting this dearth of understanding, Lingam (2006:1997) calls for more research that “capture[s] the nuances of experiencing implications of public policies in private lives.” The qualitative field interviews presented here foreground family patterns of marriage, care, and kinship in order to make visible some of the ways that the global is embedded in the local.

In order to compare responses across generations, the interview sample was stratified to include at least ten women from three age categories: 20-34 years, 35-49 years, and 50-64 years. The sample was evenly divided between women from families where several men (i.e., three or more) had migrated for labor and women from families where no men had migrated. Women of any marital status—unmarried, married, widowed, divorced, and separated—were included in the sample. As part of ethnographic practice, field interviews often include observation and more informal conversation (Lamont and Swidler 2014). The semi-structured interviews

for this project took place in respondents' homes and lasted one to three hours. This was frequently followed by informal conversations either while walking around outside of the house or over tea and shared snacks inside.

Interviews were conducted by a pair of interviewers: one non-native, beginning Bangla speaker and one Bangladeshi, native/fluent Bangla speaker from Dhaka. With permission, all interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and later transcribed and translated into English for analysis. Analysis was based on the grounded theory approach, originally written down by Glaser and Strauss (1967), to understanding the themes that emerge from transcripts of the qualitative interviews. Transcripts were analyzed via open coding for ideas, topics, and going concerns that emerged from, or are grounded in, the data. Respondents' attitudes and beliefs about work, gender, health, marriage, *purdah*, education, and male labor out-migration were explored ethnologically, which compels the researcher to focus on local members' own meaning making processes (Garfinkel 1967) and their own everyday going concerns (Gubrium and Holstein 2000). Although analysis occurs iteratively at nearly every stage of a qualitative project, the bulk of coding and categorical analyses of interview transcripts was handled using NVivo 9 software.

## Changing Expectations for Sons and Daughters

As fertility decreases and labor migration becomes more common, sons are viewed as less reliable

sources of social support even though they remain reliable sources of economic security. Respondents indicate that daughters are not only expected to take on the household and family duties their brothers once held; they are also increasingly seen as potential sources of financial support, a potential that is tied to girls' recent widespread access to formal education. With few exceptions, respondents felt that people now expect more from their daughters while expectations for sons are either staying the same or decreasing. In what follows, I outline several ways that respondents discussed changes in their sons' and daughters' roles.

### Sons' Decreasing Responsibilities

The normative situation in the study area is that people expect the responsibility of caring for aging parents to fall to sons and the daughters-in-law they bring into the family through marriage. The kind of care sons provide is primarily articulated in terms of financial support, but also includes shopping for food, medicine, and clothing, major transactions like buying or selling property, burial and funeral arrangements for parents, and responsibilities towards their siblings, especially their sisters' children.

Men's labor migration has set limits on the kinds of support sons can provide to their families. Sons and husbands who are away for work cannot do much beyond making decisions over the mobile phone and sending money home. As evidenced by the growing number of women visible in the bazaar and in local shops and offices, women have begun to take on shopping and household business

responsibilities, duties that typically belong to men. In the conversation below, Tanjila jokes about the absence of men in the village.

**Interviewer:** Where do most of the people of this village work?

**Tanjila:** Most of them work either in Dhaka or abroad.

**Interviewer:** Most of the men moved outside for work.

**Tanjila:** Yes, you find only women here! [Laughing]

It was difficult to pinpoint how sons' roles have changed because women who thought sons were doing less compared to before were not always willing to articulate why or how sons' responsibilities have decreased. This was consistent with other responses women gave about their sons, including a reluctance to discuss any negative consequences of their labor migration. They did, however, communicate that general expectations for sons have narrowed to include financial support, concern for siblings, and their presence in arranging parents' burials. When asked about changes in sons' responsibilities, Himani focuses on financial support:

**Himani:** There are some sons who do things for their parents and some who do nothing for their parents. But, I think it [their responsibility] has generally gone up compared to before.

**Interviewer:** Tell me about the nature of this increase. What did they not do in the past, but are doing now?

**Himani:** They are doing many things now for their parents. In the past, poverty was in every family to some extent. Compared to that, they are doing more than before.

**Interviewer:** This means they provide better financial support for their parents?

**Himani:** Yes.

That sons are doing less is reflected in Mala's statement below.

I am seeing from all around. Sons don't do anything for their parents at all. They go abroad as soon as they get married. His wife sometimes does not give meals to his parents properly. So why should I be dependent on my son at all! It is natural maybe! Sometimes they [sons and daughters-in-law] behave well. Still, I am not going to depend on them.

By going abroad for work, her son supports her financially, but he and his wife are less reliable sources of the kinds of care work that require one to be present in the *bari*. Mala goes on to suggest that, in addition to their financial contribution, sons are important because burial remains their responsibility.

**Mala:** I have one brother-in-law who has only daughters. He doesn't have a son.

**Interviewer:** Does he worry about who will take care of him?

**Mala:** Yes. That's why I always ask him who will bury him when he dies!

Bina is a young mother with one son and two daughters. In the conversation below, Bina first tells us about the normative situation wherein sons take over as heads of household. Upon further reflection, she adjusts her response to reflect recent changes:

**Bina:** In our culture, sons take care of their parents. Sons take on the responsibilities of the family. Girls leave their father's house after they are married so they cannot usually take on responsibilities towards their family.

**Interviewer:** So [clarifying] sons take on the responsibility of the family. The girls cannot.

**Bina:** Actually [pauses to think], it's also a reality that girls were not educated before. Now, the question becomes which side she will manage: her parents' side or husband's side! Girls' education was not very common in the past. Now, the number of girls getting an education is increasing. If my daughter is educated and does some job to earn money, she can look after me; otherwise, how can she!

Not only does Bina make the point that daughters could be expected to earn and support their parents, she indicates that increased access to education enables this shift.

### “Girls Have More Responsibilities than in the Past”

With very few exceptions, respondents felt that the responsibilities of girls and young women have increased compared to the past. Those that did not think girls' responsibilities have increased said they thought the amount has stayed the same. No one we spoke to felt girls' responsibilities had decreased. These sentiments played out when women discussed their future expectations for their sons and daughters and when they discussed their preference for male or female children.

Directly attacking the idea of son preference, Shoomi told us that daughters are now preferable to sons because they are taking on more responsibilities than in the past. She attributes this to changes in education, as well as an increase in marriage age.

**Shoomi:** Nowadays, girls have more responsibilities than in the past. Girls worry about their parents, they study, they try to earn. They feel more for their parents. In the past, girls were married at a young age. But, now they're going to school and studying. Girls don't marry so early now. These days they work in the household, simultaneously maintaining their studies. Girls are definitely studying more now than in the past.

**Interviewer:** I see. Has it been more common for girls to work at a job?

**Shoomi:** Yes. Now they are entering the job sectors in greater numbers. The number of girls who work has definitely increased. And daughters who work are still compassionate and help their parents while earning an income.

Parveen and her sister-in-law tell us that daughters have increased expectations in terms of education and earning.

**Interviewer:** Do you think girls have the same responsibilities towards their families as in the past?

**Parveen:** No, it has changed...They are doing many things for their family. It has increased.

**Interviewer:** Can you give me an example of how their responsibility has increased?

**Parveen:** They are doing all kinds of work. What DON'T they do!

**Parveen's sister-in-law:** Girls are doing so many things. In the past, they didn't study, now they are. Isn't it a new responsibility! They are doing work, earning money. And hasn't it helped a family to be developed! Some girls earn money even working at home.

Sabrina, a young woman who has one son and is a primary school teacher, also feels that the respon-

sibilities of girls have increased. Using herself as an example, she explains how this is the case even for daughters who marry and follow the normative patrilocal residence pattern.

**Sabrina:** In the past, girls just performed their duties as a bride or a girl of the house. But, now, if a girl thinks that she needs to do anything for her family, she will do that. For example, if I think that my parents require anything, I can do that for them. I will work hard and try for my family. Even for my in-law's house. I always feel the responsibility of doing things for both of my families. I am giving my personal example here.

**Interviewer:** Sure.

**Sabrina:** I always try to know what my family members need. I try to fill up their needs. During the Eid festival, I try to buy gifts for my father-in-law, mother-in-law, and brothers-in-law. I also try to arrange food and other things...I think these are my responsibilities.

**Interviewer:** Yes. So you are contributing during the festivals.

**Sabrina:** Of course.

**Interviewer:** Couldn't girls in the past do the same things as you are doing now?

**Sabrina:** I don't think so. I think in the past girls could not do as much as we can do now. As far as I know, girls couldn't work like today. I think, as I am doing a job, I can try to meet all these needs and do other responsibilities for everybody, for all of my relatives. As I have my own money now.

**Interviewer:** With your own money, you can do that.

**Sabrina:** Yes, because I have my own money. So I try to fill up their needs and make them happy.

Sabrina's case demonstrates a twofold increase in young women's responsibilities: First, she contributes financially to the household of her in-laws, which was not an expectation families held for their daughters-in-law in the past. Second, is also compelled to provide for her parents when they need it. Sabrina's husband is a paid member of the military, but her personal money, the money she refers to above, comes from her teaching job. She cites her parents' investment in her education as the reason for her ability to have a job.

### **Distance between Households: Keeping Married Daughters Close**

Three to four generations ago, women in rural Bangladesh did not often leave their in-laws' *bari* except to visit their father's household on special occasions. Higher status families married their daughters to grooms who lived farther away and visiting the natal *bari* was accomplished more easily by women from wealthy families who could afford a *palki*.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, travelling was not an issue for brides in poor families because marriages among these families occurred within closer-knit kinship networks, making the distance between households quite short. Although women's mobility in public space is accomplished more easily now than in the past, the distance between natal and marital *baris* remains a concern when parents arrange their children's marriages. The difference is that today, access

<sup>3</sup> A *palki*, also called a sedan chair or palanquin, consists of a seat or box wrapped in cloth that is connected to two or four long beams. Anywhere from four to eight men, or bearers, hold the beams and carry the *palki* from one place to the next. Wealthier families could afford these means of conveyance, as well as the human labor necessary to carry the *palki* and escort women on their journey.

to daughters' care is an important factor when considering *bari* distance.

**Interviewer:** Do you think it is better if your father's house is near to your husband's house or is it better to be far away?

**Afia:** To be near is better.

**Interviewer:** Why?

**Afia:** Because if it's near, then if my father or anyone else falls ill, or if anyone has a problem, then it's easy to go to my father's house quickly. If not, then if they fall ill, I will not catch them in enough time.

**Interviewer:** Are your father and mother alive?

**Afia:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** Ok, so what would your parents prefer: Do they prefer it if your house is close to their house or far?

**Afia:** They [also] think it is better if their children's father-in-law's house is near to their house.

Nazia's marital *bari* is a twenty-minute walk from her natal *bari*. She and her parents believe it is better to stay close by because it minimizes travel costs in case they become ill.

**Nazia:** If my parents are sick, I can visit them whenever I want. I can visit even two or three times. If their home was far away, could I visit like this?! It's better to be near. My husband is a daily-wager farmer. He earns 150 taka per day. It's difficult to maintain a family with this amount of money. Isn't it difficult for me to manage extra money for travel costs?! If you consider this, it's better for me to have my father's house near to my husband's house.

**Interviewer:** Ok. What do your parents think about it?

**Nazia:** They also feel good about it. Will they feel badly about it!

**Interviewer:** I see.

**Nazia:** My other sister cannot visit my parents as easily as I can. She lives far away from my father's house.

When a parent dies, it is sons who typically act as heads of household and, together with their wives, care for the surviving widowed parent. However, respondents reveal through their living arrangements and their comments about *bari* distance that daughters can now expect to be the ones who will care for widowed parents.

Women's care work in the *bari* occurs in a rural context where there are no social services or means of elder care beyond that of the family. When a parent becomes ill, the amount of emotional and physical care work can be quite intense, as we see from Ishrat's comment below.

What can parents want from girls! You see, in that house a bed-ridden old man has been there for one and a half months. He leaves his body to waste in the bed. He has a daughter who cleans all this and has taken care of him from the beginning of his sickness. Parents expect this kind of care from girls. Daughters also wail more than daughters-in-law in parent's death. They also care more. That is the thing parents expect from their daughters nowadays.

Roopa's family is an example of two generations of women being pulled towards their natal family for the sake of care work. Roopa explains that, as the only daughter among her siblings, she and her parents maintained a close relationship after her marriage:

**Interviewer:** So, do you think it's better to have your father's house near or far from your husband's house?

**Roopa:** Yes, it's better to be near. I can visit them easily.

**Interviewer:** Are your parents alive?

**Roopa:** My father is no more; I only have my mother.

**Interviewer:** What does your mother think about the distance? Does she feel good about having her daughter at a near distance?

**Roopa:** As I am the only daughter, they married me at a near distance. If they don't see me for a couple of days, they ask me to visit. They don't feel happy if they don't see me often.

### ***Ghor Jamai: Reliance in the Sons-in-Law***

Daughters-in-law, who were traditionally the solution to the care equation, are no longer viewed as a reliable source of future care in households with sons who are working abroad or in households with only daughters. The patrilocal residence pattern is being challenged as parents view biological daughters as their future source of care-giving and social support. In cases where parents want their daughters to remain with them, but also do not want their daughters to work outside the *bari*, the question arises of who will provide economic support in the future. Parents with only daughters may come to see marriage as an opportunity not only to negotiate the future care work that can be provided by a daughter but to gain economic security by adopting a son. Below, Mala tells us that she quells her sister-in-law's concerns over having no son by reminding her that she can "get a son" through her daughter's marriage.

My husband's younger sister has four daughters. She doesn't have any sons. She always worries about her future. She says she wants to adopt a son from anyone to take care of her when she grows old. I try to make her realize though. I tell her, "You will get a son when your daughter gets married. You need not to worry at all. He will take care of you like a mother, you will take care of him like a son."

Nazia, a young married woman with two daughters and no sons, says the decision to have another child and try for a boy is up to her husband. Although she currently has no sons, Nazia believes that it is more necessary for boys to get an education than girls. Nazia sees educating boys as good for their parents, as well as their future in-laws. She tells us that her lack of a son poses little problem so long as her daughters marry a good groom.

**Interviewer:** As you have only two daughters, have you ever thought about or worried about who would take care of you in the future or when you are old?

**Nazia:** What else! My daughters will look after me. Will they leave me! They and their husbands will look after me then.

Nazia's neighbor chimes in with a clarification: "You see, if the son-in-law is good, then daughters can do many things for their parents. If they are not good, daughters cannot do anything. That's why people usually need a son."

The practice of *ghor jamai* marriage maintains the alignment of economic value with boys and men. In small families, and particularly in families with only daughters, parents are reluctant to marry their

daughters out and allow them to move to an in-laws' house that is far away.

**Interviewer:** You said that parents expect their sons to look after them in their old age. They don't expect such things from their daughters. Now what will happen if parents have only daughters? Who will take care of them in their old age?

**Atfa:** Then, parents will want their younger daughter to be married at a nearby area or want their son-in-law to stay with them and look after them.

**Interviewer:** So, they want *ghor jamai*?

**Atfa:** *Ghor jamai*.

**Atfa's neighbor:** And with this, parents will prefer to marry their daughter within their relatives, so that they can get a son-in-law from a closer relation.

The *ghor jamai*, which translates to English as "inside/household groom," is viewed as a positive strategy among rural and working class families who use it to circumvent, rather than completely eschew, normative labor and residence patterns. By adopting a son through the marriage of their daughter to a groom from their kinship group, families recreate patrilineal descent patterns. Even family businesses and property can be kept within a family line because it can be passed from fathers to grandsons through the daughter/son-in-law dyad, without handing lands and households to daughters and their in-laws. It can also prevent surrendering property to siblings, which allows assets to be preserved for a widow or be passed on to children and grandchildren.

Among financially solvent families, the phrase *ghor jamai* has a negative, emasculating connotation.

When upper-class families are without sons, the father or patriarch of the family will manage his savings and assets in such a way that he can provide for himself well into old age. Family wealth means his daughters and their husbands never have to take responsibility for the bride's parents. In such families, a groom who comes to live with his wife's parents is viewed as a dependent and, therefore, less masculine. Class and status boundaries are made visible when a groom fails to earn enough to maintain the standard of living that his bride's father had achieved. In these situations, the groom may be denigrated with the term *ghor jamai*.

### Beyond Sons-in-Law and Daughters-in-Law

As an older woman with three sons and three daughters who grew up in a household with four brothers and four sisters, Shoomi has thought a lot about the various things sons and daughters do for their families. She believes things have completely changed with regard to sons and daughters. Without reference to any reliance on sons-in-law, Shoomi makes the case that son preference is declining and says parents today can rely on their biological daughters more than their sons. Her sentiment is shared by other women who continue to view sons as sources of financial stability, but not reliable sources of care work or emotional connection.

**Shoomi:** Parents adore their daughters more than their sons. Nowadays, daughters remain closer to their parents all the time, even after marriage. A daughter may bring you a glass of water, which is a symbol of caring towards her parents. She does other household work, too. Daughters take care of their parents when

they are sick. They help with cooking. Do sons do the same thing? They don't!

Parents with only daughters are renegotiating gender norms in order to secure their future financial well-being. They are becoming more open to new family and economic arrangements like allowing their daughters to work outside the home and *ghor ja-mai* marriage. As Lutfa explains: "If my daughter can earn for me, I don't need any sons." This is echoed by Sabrina, who is one of four daughters in a family with no sons:

Generally, in our society, parents' responsibility is all about getting their daughter married. But, there are some exceptions now. My parents are very happy that we, sisters, are working at jobs.

There are others, like Tahmina, who believe parents who make their daughters look after them are selfish.

**Interviewer:** What do the parents who only have daughters think about their future?

**Tahmina:** What else would they think! Maybe some will want their daughter to continue her education. Some will engage their daughter in any kind of business. They will do this for their own future. But, maybe one day their daughter will get married. I ask them, doesn't she have her own future!

Tahmina is one of two respondents who live in their natal *bari*, but felt that life would be better if they were living far away in a marital *bari*. Her critique reflects an important question that different families are answering in different ways: What will the future hold for these daughters?

## Discussion

Relieving poverty and promoting smaller families may have many positive effects for women and girls in Matlab, but it should not be taken as fact that women's lives automatically improve under existing economic development efforts. The contemporary focus on women's health and empowerment as integral to population control uses language that takes for granted a positive relationship between women's experiences and declining family size. The assumption that women benefit from smaller families and sending men abroad for work may be rendering invisible many of the unintended consequences of decreasing family size for rural women and girls.

In rural Bangladesh, the expansion of women's responsibilities to include caring for and even providing financially for their natal families represents a shift in the gendered division of labor. Under new arrangements, men's roles are narrowing to include financial support, burial arrangements, and a general responsibility for siblings. Men's responsibility towards siblings tends to also take the form of financial support, but this brotherly responsibility is also declining as people have fewer siblings than in the past. A double burden for women emerges in the context where care work is culturally defined as the purview of women at the same time that women's economic contribution to household finances is growing in acceptance.

The care work findings presented here share some similarities with Lee's (2010) research on care work in Japan, which found that gendered divisions of care work remain intact even when the normal hierarchy of who should care is disrupted by demo-

graphic shifts. As in Bangladesh, daughters in Japan would exit their natal family at marriage and norms of filial responsibility favored the role of the eldest son. Because women are seen as responsible for care work, the son's wife would care for her in-laws. However, changes in family structure and women's roles challenged this pattern (Lee 2010). In line with shifts in rural Bangladesh, Lee (2010) found that women in Japan are torn between caring for in-laws and caring for natal parents. However, families in Japan can increasingly turn to public or market resources to meet their parental care needs. No such option is available in rural Bangladesh where national policies emphasize urbanizing and exporting labor rather than developing local care resources.

Other research has linked state policies to globalization and the intimate world of care work (Misra, Woodring, and Merz 2006). By examining the various migration policies, welfare structures, and economic adjustments in France, Germany, Morocco, and Poland, Misra and colleagues (2006) show how states produce specific labor migration patterns and shape the gendered, international division of care. In Bangladesh, state policies have catalyzed widespread labor migration, but almost exclusively among men, creating a redistribution of women's care work at the local rather than international level.

On the surface, the shift towards educating girls, increasing women's mobility between families, and allowing women to earn wages may appear to improve women's lives. But, rather than producing an increase in financial stability and women's power within the family, this shift appears to be constraining women with a doubling or tripling of their re-

sponsibilities. These data do not suggest that women's decision-making or family power have significantly changed; instead, women experience increasing demand for their domestic labor coupled with growing expectations that they will work for wages now or in the future. This finding is consistent with research from other rural areas of Bangladesh, specifically that of Chowdhury (2010) who found that family decisions to place women in the paid labor force are not a matter of balancing labor and leisure time, but rather a decision about balancing unpaid household work and paid work outside the home.

The findings of this study can be contextualized through the contributions of Naila Kabeer (1994); specifically, her description of how women became a particular constituency in development efforts. Kabeer points out that, since the 1950s, economists have been concerned with "the population problem" as a barrier to achieving economic growth in the developing world. With limited knowledge about how people's lives are organized in terms of marriage, parent-child relationships, and kinship, economists set development agendas that include economic and fertility goals. Development models are based on the assumption that high rates of population growth inhibit national investment capacity because economic surpluses would have to be "used up in consumption and welfare expenditures instead of being invested in productive capital formation" (Kabeer 1994:3). Women, then, are central to development efforts as free care workers who serve in the home, and as liberal individuals who can choose to curb their own fertility. Through policy, social and economic changes are set in motion with little to no regard

for the consequences of development agendas for women and families.

Raewyn Connell (2014) goes further, pointing out that new economic development strategies are not just about relieving national debt burdens and creating surplus by shrinking social welfare, which hardly existed in the poorest countries to begin with. Dismantling and discouraging social welfare programs has been part of a larger development agenda that, Connell (2014) argues, is an extension of coloniality as global capital seeks comparative advantage in the Global South. Economists view women who provide unquantified reproductive labor in the home as an untapped resource that can be leveraged towards production as inexpensive sources of labor. From this, we can understand that the coupling of population control with economic development means that the family and, specifically, women's bodies become sites for a development agenda that is also the neoliberal agenda. Considering how rural women are less likely than men or their urban counterparts to reap the benefits of market-led economic growth, it can be said that rural women face increased burdens in service of economic shifts that benefit others, but rarely benefit them.

## Conclusion

In Matlab, demographic changes like increasing life expectancy and decreasing family size are concurrent with male labor migration and increasing access to education for girls. Daughter's responsibilities are expanding to meet new expectations about educational attainment for girls and the expectation that they will take on duties no longer fulfilled by

their male family members. Increasingly, husbands, brothers, and sons are absent because men are migrating in search of paid work; or these men did not come into the picture in the first place due to smaller family sizes overall. The increase in women's filial responsibilities is evidenced by parents' discussions of their future expectations for their sons and daughters and through women's descriptions of their own life circumstances today. With few exceptions, respondents felt that families have come to expect more from their daughters while expectations for sons are either staying the same or decreasing. The changes in residence, marital, and labor patterns described here represent, as Connell (2014) describes it, a dis-ordering and re-structuring of gender relations. Emerging family structures appear to shift a tremendous burden onto women and girls within the family.

Policies and political language that emerged after the 1994 conference in Cairo often conflate fertility reduction with women's empowerment and poverty reduction. The unquestioned assumptions that link low fertility with women's empowerment ignore the entanglements of gender and kin relations, including the complex effects of family size on women's labor and care work. In rural Bangladesh, population policies combine with state policies aimed at opening the economy and promoting the out-migration of men in the villages. As these data demonstrate, adjustments in family arrangements that become necessary for smaller rural families, and for labor migrant families, may indicate an increase in the value of daughters, but this increase in value is predicated upon growing filial demands on women's capacities to learn, earn, and perform family care.

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