Family Structure and Change in Rural Bangladesh
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Family structure and change in rural Bangladesh

SAJEDA AMIN

Abstract. This analysis uses data from an intensive village study to investigate whether rising landlessness leads to increasing fragmentation and nucleation of families in rural Bangladesh. It was found that, even after rapid fertility decline, the elderly and women continue to rely extensively on family support. Although landlessness puts stress on intergenerational relations, a favourably low dependency ratio (elders to sons), brought about by the child-mortality decline of the 1950s and 1960s, has allowed the burden to be spread over larger numbers of sons than were previously available. A persistence of traditional living arrangements, in which sons form their own households in the homesteads of their fathers, also contributes to retarding the process of family disintegration that is likely to be caused when farm size decreases and the role of the farm economy in a traditional peasant society diminishes.

The recent fertility decline in Bangladesh suggests that fundamental social change is underway. Several contraceptive prevalence surveys and a demographic surveillance system have shown that fertility decline began in the late 1970s or early 1980s. Compared with other countries at similar levels of development, it is a rapid transition (Bongaarts and Watkins 1995). Such a decline in fertility invites explanations, including ones about change in desired family size as it is driven by the transformation of the family as an institution. Indeed, an intense debate has taken place concerning that issue with Bangladesh as the battleground (see Thomas 1991, 1993; Cleland 1993). However, empirical evidence on change in families and households remains surprisingly scant. We know little about the extent of change in the nature of households and families and its role in the course of fertility transition. Even the highly sophisticated Demographic Surveillance System of the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh, is unable to yield periodically updated information on the formation and dissolution of households. This paper reports an attempt to shed light on these issues with an in-depth analysis of households in two rural villages of Bangladesh.

The thesis of increasing poverty and landlessness as forces of change affecting fertility sees the family as a mediating institution: poverty weakens the strength of family ties (Adnan 1993), and raises the relative cost of rearing children (Kabeer 1994). Because poverty has been a defining characteristic of the Bangladesh economy, the alternative thesis of development-led modernization, generally thought to be the force behind family change elsewhere (Knodel and Debaivala 1992; Mason 1992), cannot be applied with much conviction to this setting.

Poverty-induced change in family and fertility rests on well-documented differentials in household living arrangement by landholding status. In rural Bangladesh, sons in landless households leave their parental home earlier than sons in landed households to form households of their own (Cain 1978; Khuda 1988). Cain (1978) argued that, without the leverage of landholding, landless fathers have less influence over the timing of a son’s departure from the parental household. Adnan (1993) extrapolates from such findings to suggest that fertility has declined because sons can no longer be counted on for their elders’ support, with the possible consequence that increasing landlessness leads to disintegration of the family support system for the elderly.

A similar and related argument has been developed connecting the breakdown of extended family living arrangements and the situation of women (Adnan 1993; Kabeer 1994). Kabeer suggests, as a possible explanation of changing fertility, that as poverty weakens the family support system, it promotes dissatisfaction with marital and family relationships and encourages women to seek more autonomous lifestyles; the implication for fertility is that women seek alternative roles to those of wife and mother.

In this paper, changes in family structure are explored during a 15-year time span beginning with the onset of a significant fertility decline. On the basis of data from a village study conducted in 1991–93, compared with data from similar studies conducted before fertility decline, remarkably little evidence is found of structural change in families or in the functioning of families as a source of support for women and the elderly. The elderly continue to depend on sons, and women’s dependence on familial networks is reflected in low rates of female...
headship of households. A moderate increase in the proportion of nuclear households may be attributed to a long-standing characteristic of the family-formation pattern peculiar to this population, and may be interpreted as a reflection of continuity rather than of change in the traditional pattern of household formation. Although the rise of landlessness is a considerable force for change in the timing of the formation of new households, and in the overall distribution of living arrangements, a concomitant increase in children's survival to adulthood, broadening the availability of sons for support of the elderly, is a counterbalancing influence.

A series of papers on family and fertility based on fieldwork conducted in the mid-1970s in Char Gopalpur, Bangladesh, serves as a point of departure for this study (Cain 1977, 1978, 1981, 1982; Cain et al. 1979). Writing about a time of extreme impoverishment and high fertility – the country was recovering from a devastating famine, and a national fertility survey indicated that natural fertility prevailed (Cleland et al. 1994) – Cain described for Char Gopalpur all the characteristics of the joint family-formation system, as described by Hajnal (1982). Early marriage was the norm for both men and women. Couples resided with parents for some time and then formed their own households. Some differences from this arrangement existed according to landholding class. Sons in landless households married and departed from their parental abodes earlier than sons in landed households, suggesting that land impoverishment would, over time, lead to the disintegration of the family as a source of support. However, another overarching theme in Cain’s writing is the structural integrity and resilience of family institutions, including patriarchy, during times of change. The central objective of the analysis reported here was to assess to what extent the structural integrity of the family had responded to the challenge posed by land impoverishment in rural Bangladesh.

THE STUDY AREA AND THE DATA
The primary source for this paper is a detailed set of data collected over the course of almost two years during 1991–93 in two villages in Bangladesh. The study replicates the method used by Cain in the 1970s in Char Gopalpur. Comparison of data generated by the two studies is the central analytical strategy.

While two villages cannot represent all of rural Bangladesh, the villages studied are not idiosyncratic, distinguished, or extraordinary in any sense. The villages are in Mohanpur thana, Rajshahi District in northwestern Bangladesh, a district with somewhat higher-than-average levels of contraceptive use, lower-than-average levels of education, and low levels of out-migration relative to other parts of Bangladesh. Rajshahi Division contains some of the poorest districts in the country, but Rajshahi District is close to the national average in terms of economic and health indicators (UNICEF 1994).

The villages were selected purposively so that one (Village A) would represent the mainstream, agriculture-based rural economy, neither extraordinarily poor owing to climatic conditions nor unusually prosperous for economic, technological, or institutional reasons. Village B is actually three small, contiguous mouzas, chosen because it has experienced some economic diversification. (A mouza is an administrative unit – Village B is regarded as one village by the local population.) The difference is most evident in a more diverse occupational structure, but educational levels are also higher in Village B. A primary school established in 1887 accounts for a higher level of schooling here than in Village A.

The difference between the two villages results, in part, from their relative proximity and access to Rajshahi town. Village A is farther away (25 km – 15.5 miles) and set back at a distance of about 2.6 km (1.6 miles) from a major highway, Village B is a roadside village approximately 15 km (9.3 miles) from Rajshahi. Both villages are now easily reached by paved roads, though the road link for Village A is relatively recent. A handful of men from Village B commute to Rajshahi, but none from village A does so. Rajshahi is a small, sleepy provincial town. A major north–south river divide makes the metropolitan areas inaccessible to the population in the Rajshahi Division generally.

Census and reproductive history data were collected on all 789 households in the study area at the beginning of the study. In addition, more detailed data were collected from a sample of 240 households on family histories, asset positions, time-use patterns, economic transactions, crop cultivation, and marriage histories.

Although the Rajshahi region is characterized by some distinctive cultural stereotypes – the people are said to be temperamentally mild and easygoing, women are strong and assertive, and men are soft-spoken – these characteristics are not dramatically consequential for the way families are structured or for their potential for structural change. More surprising is the faster pace of fertility decline, given that this has been generally regarded as a
backwater region. A recent analysis of fertility survey data suggests that the lower intensity of religious practice in Rajshahi and other districts of northwestern Bangladesh is related to the higher levels of contraceptive use and lower fertility levels observed here (Amin et al. 1995). However, these cultural attributes of a more liberal social climate and greater openness to change in Rajshahi do not result in more salaried work for women there or a higher economic contribution by them than elsewhere in Bangladesh (Amin 1995).

One major point of difference between Cain’s study area and the villages in the present study is the level of landlessness: 71 per cent of households in Village A and 74 per cent in Village B had landholdings of less than 1.5 acres, in contrast with 42 per cent in Char Gopalpur. These differences in landholding patterns are similar to the change that has taken place for the country in the same time period. However, the economic situation for the country as a whole, and probably for this region as well, has improved relative to what it was in the 1970s (Amin et al. 1995). Thus, although land availability has diminished rapidly, other developments have created occupational diversity and improved land productivity, so that poverty is not as closely tied to landlessness as it was in the 1970s.

Strong evidence exists that fertility has declined in Mohanpur. Period estimates for total fertility in 1991, based on births to currently married women of reproductive age in the previous year, were 3.99 in Village A and 2.60 in Village B; the corresponding figure for Char Gopalpur in 1976 was 5.12. Among currently married women in Mohanpur, more than 60 per cent use contraceptives in both villages, which is higher than the regional average of 55 per cent at the time; in Char Gopalpur, the figure was less than 10 per cent in the late 1970s, which is consistent with the national average for that period. Data on first use of modern contraceptives show that they came into vogue in the mid-1970s and that their adoption has picked up considerably in recent years (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Frequency of use of a modern contraceptive among women who have ever used a method, by year of first use, Mohanpur (1992).

LIVING ARRANGEMENTS OF THE ELDERLY AND WOMEN

Living arrangements of the elderly are considered an important measure of the extent to which their families serve as their source of support. Table 1 shows the living arrangements of persons 60 years of age and older in Mohanpur in 1991, contrasted with people in the same age group in Char Gopalpur in 1976. The elderly rely on the support of sons in the 1990s in much the same way they did in the 1970s: 81 per cent of the elderly in Village A and 91 per cent in Village B live with or adjacent to married or unmarried sons, compared with 91 per cent in Char Gopalpur. The proportion of the elderly living with a married son is 57 per cent in both Mohanpur villages and 62 per cent in Char Gopalpur. In Mohanpur, a slightly higher proportion of the elderly live with a son nearby rather than in the same household. Also, a slightly higher
Table 1. Comparison of living arrangements of persons aged 60 and older: Char Gopalpur (1976) and Mohanpur (1991)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Living arrangement</th>
<th>Char Gopalpur (1976) (%)</th>
<th>Village A (%)</th>
<th>Village B (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>With married son(s)</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With unmarried, mature son(s)*</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If no mature son</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With married sons adjacent</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apart from sons</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With married daughter</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data for Char Gopalpur from Cain (1986). * Mature sons are defined as those aged 15 or older.

Table 2. Living arrangement of mothers of household head, Mohanpur, Bangladesh (1991)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Living arrangements</th>
<th>All mothers (%)</th>
<th>Widowed mothers (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In reference household</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>31.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In household of the father of household head</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In household of the brother of household head</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>45.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alone</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>23.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In household of the stepfather of household head</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

—, Not available.

The proportion of the elderly live with a daughter – 4 per cent as opposed to 2 per cent.

One contrast between the two Mohanpur villages that deserves attention is the difference between Village A and Village B in the proportion of elderly who live with unmarried, mature (older than 15 years) sons. The figures are 7 per cent in Village A and 20 per cent in Village B. Otherwise the living arrangements of the elderly are similar. As mentioned above, the two villages have different levels of education: 38 per cent of boys are enrolled in school in Village A and 57 per cent attend school in Village B. Probably because of school attendance – boys in school are not usually married – the proportions of men remaining single are also different. In the 15–19 age group, 87 per cent of Village A men are single, compared with 94 per cent of those in Village B. In the 20–24 age group, the contrast is even sharper: 47 per cent in Village A versus 63 per cent in Village B. Among mature sons, the proportion attending school at the time of the study was considerably higher in Village B. Apart from this differential, the overwhelming conclusion from Table 1 is that living arrangements of the elderly are surprisingly similar across the three villages.

Living arrangements of elderly women were also similar in all three villages. The situation of elderly women, who are marginalized and vulnerable in Bangladeshi society, warrants special attention since the consequences of a weakening support system, even if not evident for all the elderly, may show up for these women. Table 2 shows the living arrangements of mothers (column 1) and widowed mothers (column 2) of household heads. These data corroborate the evidence in Table 1 of the overwhelming dependence on sons: 44 per cent among all mothers and 77 per cent of widowed mothers live in the household of a son. Twenty-three per cent of widowed mothers live alone, usually in an adjacent hut. The same classification for mothers of household heads was not found for the Char Gopalpur study, but the proportion of mothers who live alone appears to be no higher in Mohanpur than Cain found 15 years ago in Char Gopalpur. Cain (1991) used a slightly different classification of the living arrangement of women older than 60, 66 per cent of whom lived with a married son, 19 per cent with a son younger than 15, and 19 per cent in their own households.

Rising numbers of female heads of household are generally cited as an indicator of the weakening of families as a source of welfare. A World Bank report on women and poverty considers 7 per cent of rural households with female heads in 1984–85 as high, and attributes the erosion of familial support systems to this situation (World Bank 1990). However, a comparison with countries around the world indicates that, in fact, a rate of 7 per cent would rank Bangladesh among the lowest in the world (Bruce et al. 1995).

Because national averages often obscure subtle changes, some small-scale studies are worth examining. Little evidence exists of change over time in rates of female headship from smaller-scale studies conducted at different times in Bangladesh, but data from such studies over a couple of decades suggest that these rates have remained fairly constant. Cain's data show that 6 per cent of households were headed by women (Cain 1976). A village study conducted in 1978 suggests that about 6 per cent of households were headed by women (Cain 1976). A village study conducted in 1978 suggests that about 6 per cent of households were headed by women (Cain 1976). A village study conducted in 1978 suggests that about 6 per cent of households were headed by women (Cain 1976). A village study conducted in 1978 suggests that about 6 per cent of households were headed by women (Cain 1976). A village study conducted in 1978 suggests that about 6 per cent of households were headed by women (Cain 1976).
FAMILY STRUCTURE AND CHANGE IN BANGLADESH

Table 3. Percentage distribution of households, by type, according to mean household size, Char Gopalpur (1976) and Mohanpur (1991)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household type</th>
<th>Char Gopalpur</th>
<th>Mohanpur</th>
<th>Village A</th>
<th>Village B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean household size</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Mean household size</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>1.0 2.0</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-nuclear</td>
<td>3.7 8.0</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear</td>
<td>5.2 56.0</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>66.3</td>
<td>61.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended</td>
<td>6.7 19.0</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint</td>
<td>9.8 15.0</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>6.0 100.0</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N)</td>
<td>(334)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>(399)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

—, Not applicable.
Household type is dependent on the co-residence of married couples and their children. A nuclear household is one with one married couple and unmarried children; a sub-nuclear household can contain one parent and children but has no married couple; extended households are married couples with their children and other relatives, but have no other married couple; joint households are extended but contain multiple married couples.

1990). Hamid (1995) reports a female headship rate of 9 per cent in 1990. In this study, the female headship rate is found to be only 6 per cent in Village A and 7 per cent in Village B, even when women who are fully supported by a nonresident husband are included.

Early and universal marriage

The data on age at marriage and the marital status of women show that the situation of women in the two study areas corresponds to a long-term trend of a slight but steady increase in age at marriage. The two study areas share similarities in terms of universal marriage and large age differences between spouses. Despite the long-term trend, age at marriage remains exceptionally early for women in Bangladesh. According to data from the Demographic and Health Surveys available in the 1990s, mean age at first marriage is 19.8 years in Pakistan, 18.7 years in India, 17.9 years in Nepal, and 24.4 years in Sri Lanka, compared with 16.7 years in Bangladesh.

The upward trend in age at first marriage has been surprisingly modest, given the major changes that have taken place in marriage transactions in recent decades. A detailed analysis of marriage transactions in these villages has revealed a remarkable inflation in dowry payments from the bride's family to the groom's, coinciding with and attributable to a marriage squeeze, which, in other settings, has triggered more rapid change in the marriage age for both men and women (Amin and Cain 1995).

More importantly, marriage remains universal for men and women. No women remained unmarried beyond age 30, and only 3 and 6 per cent of men in that age group were unmarried in Village A and B, respectively. Comparable data from Asian societies that have undergone marriage transitions show that the proportions of women remaining unmarried beyond 30 typically exceed 10 per cent (Jones 1995).

Thus, apart from the small differences in age at marriage attributable to education, little evidence is seen of change in marriage patterns, and certainly nothing is found to indicate a widespread disaffection with marriage as an institution.

HOUSEHOLD TYPE AND LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

Table 3 shows that the pattern of household structure in Mohanpur in 1991 is only marginally different from that of Char Gopalpur in 1976. The proportion of single and sub-nuclear households is low in all three villages, and the two categories together account for approximately 10 per cent of all households. (The same household classification scheme is used here as is shown in the earlier study: see note, Table 3.) Nuclear households are the dominant type in the study villages and in Char Gopalpur. Even joint household formation systems generate a distribution of predominantly nuclear households, primarily because of the average length of life, which does not allow for much generational overlap (Cain 1978; Caldwell et al. 1984). Specific variants of the joint household system also play a role in determining household structure. In Bangladesh, parents rarely live with more than one

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married son. As a result, the distribution has higher proportions of nuclear households, compared with societies where it is common for married brothers to live in the same household. Some changing patterns of residence are indicated by the higher proportion of nuclear households in Mohanpur compared with Char Gopalpur: 66 per cent in Village A, 62 per cent in Village B, and 56 per cent in Char Gopalpur. The rising proportion of nuclear households is probably generated by the survival of a greater number of sons to adulthood. This is discussed below.

Change is also evident in the proportion of joint households – fewer in Village A (9 per cent), and Village B (8 per cent) than in Char Gopalpur (15 per cent). The lower proportion of joint households is probably related to the considerably higher incidence of landlessness in Mohanpur, but the difference in family structure is nowhere as dramatic as the difference in landholding patterns. The relatively small impact of land impoverishment in Mohanpur attests to the resilience of the family, but it is also attributable, in part, to the nature of the change in land impoverishment. Land scarcity has led to diminishing farm sizes rather than absolute land destitution, and the productivity of land has improved considerably because of dry-season irrigation and the cultivation of high-yield varieties of rice.

In short, the difference between Char Gopalpur and Mohanpur is that, although the elderly continue to rely on sons, some minor changes have occurred in the structure of households.

Factors Affecting Household Structure

Increasing survival of sons to adulthood

One explanation of changing household structure may be the survival of more sons to adulthood. The ratio of men aged 20–49 (a proxy for sons) to men older than 50 (a proxy for fathers) is 4.0 for Village A, 3.9 for Village B, and 3.2 for Char Gopalpur. Owing to the particular pattern of joint living arrangement common in Bangladesh, where, typically, only one married son remains in his parents’ household, survival of more sons to adulthood allows elderly parents to co-reside with a married son, even when higher proportions of their sons live in separate households. The joint family in Bangladesh is different from the living arrangements observed in parts of India, in that there are very few collaterally extended households – that is, brothers seldom remain in a joint household after the death of a father. Rarely does more than one married son remain co-resident in his parent’s household. Thus, there can be a change in family structure in the aggregate – an increase in the proportion of nuclear households – with no change in the co-residence of parents with sons. The higher proportion of nuclear household units in Mohanpur villages (66 and 62 per cent) relative to Char Gopalpur (56 per cent) may be attributable to the ratio of sons to fathers. Considering the timing of the studies in Mohanpur (1991) and Char Gopalpur (1976), the difference between the two study populations in the ratio of sons to fathers is to be expected and is consistent with the national data of improving survival to adulthood.

Child-survival improvements that took place a generation ago are now affecting the family composition of those families in which sons are coming of age and forming households. Increased survival of sons leads to a lower dependency ratio of parents to sons. Even a cursory look at census data on old-age dependency ratios for men indicates that some dramatic changes have occurred in the last 40 years. Because of decreased child mortality, the ratio of younger adult men (sons) relative to older men (fathers) has been increasing. This change first became evident with the 1961 census (Table 4).

Changing fertility affecting household size

Changes in household size can come about either because of alterations in co-residence patterns or because of changes in fertility and mortality. The average household sizes of 4.7 and 4.9 people in Village A and Village B, respectively, are considerably lower than the average size of 6.0 members per family in Char Gopalpur (see Table 3), suggesting change in dependency ratios. The mean family size for different family arrangements is also shown in the Table. Char Gopalpur families of the nuclear, extended nuclear, and joint family types were larger on average than in the Mohanpur villages. To obtain this result, a standardization

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Table 4. Ratio of younger to older men in Bangladesh

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census</th>
<th>Old-age dependency ratio in Bangladesh: (males aged 20–49)/(males aged 50+)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>2.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>3.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>2.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>3.28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Median annual income of households per adult equivalent, by household type, according to age of household head, Mohanpur, Bangladesh (1991)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household type</th>
<th>Age of head</th>
<th>Taka</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>3,496</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-nuclear</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>5,012</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>7,457</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended nuclear</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8,480</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>6,211</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adult equivalence is calculated by giving children less than equal weight: 0.2 for ages 0–6, 0.3 for ages 7–12, and 0.5 for ages 13–17. Household type is dependent on the co-residence of married couples and children. A nuclear household is one with one married couple and unmarried children; a sub-nuclear household can contain one parent and children, but has no married couple; extended households are married couples with their children and other relatives, but no other married couple; joint households are extended, but contain multiple married couples. All female-headed households in the single and sub-nuclear categories.

The technique was used: household sizes for Village A and Village B were recalculated, applying the household-type distribution of Char Gopalpur. This calculation gave estimates of 4.97 and 5.06 persons for Village A and Village B respectively. If Mohanpur villages were to have the household-type distribution of Char Gopalpur, the average family size overall would increase by 24 and 18 per cent, respectively, for Village A and Village B. The remaining differences, 76 and 82 per cent, are attributable to differences in fertility. Thus, the difference in family size that is observed between Mohanpur and Char Gopalpur is caused primarily by changing fertility and not by changing co-residence patterns.

Household type, income, and life-cycle stage

Table 5 gives a measure of the material consequences of household living arrangements as assessed by levels of household income, and suggests why the elderly are motivated to live with their children and not on their own. Income shown is per adult equivalent. Data on annual income are collected in 12-monthly rounds. It includes estimates of the value of agricultural produce, income earned from business or employment, and money received as a gift or support by the household. The most striking contrast is between single-person and multiple-person households. Single-person households, which are primarily those of older women with an average age of 60, are considerably worse off than the rest of the population, with average income less than 50 per cent of a person living in a nuclear household. Members of sub-nuclear households are better off than single persons, but also considerably worse off than members of nuclear, extended, or joint households, primarily because sub-nuclear households have few adult male members. The highest average income levels are found in nuclear households, although joint households generally have greater landholdings. Lower income availability of joint households is probably related to the earning capacity and age of household heads. The average age of joint household heads is 50 years, compared with the much lower average age of the heads of nuclear households (40 years) and of extended households (41 years).

From marriage to household formation

An important characteristic of the family formation system in rural Bangladesh is that almost all couples begin life together as part of a joint family headed by another couple, usually the parents of the male partner. The eventual composition of families in society thus depends on how soon after marriage young couples form their own household. This formation occurs earlier in landless households than in landed households.

Table 6 presents some data related to household formation in Mohanpur. The first column is a life-table estimate of the period in years from marriage to household formation; column two shows the proportions of households that were formed in the first year of marriage. The timing of household

Table 6. Mean duration of time after marriage that couples live with parents before forming their own households, and proportion of couples who form their own household in the first year of marriage, by village, ownership of land, and age of head of household, Mohanpur, Bangladesh (1991)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Years married before formed new household</th>
<th>Formed new household in first year of marriage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Residence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village A</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village B</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household socio-economic status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owns ≤ 50 decimals of land</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owns ≥ 50 decimals of land</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of household head</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–39</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40+</td>
<td>5.67</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
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</table>

ª A decimal = 0.5 acres.
formation is associated with landholding status. Functionally landless families have a mean period from marriage to household formation of 2.4 years, compared with 4.2 years for families with more than 50 decimals (0.5 acres) of land. This factor leads to substantial cohort differences in household formation. Younger cohorts tend to form their own households earlier than older cohorts, probably because of increasing landlessness.

Village B has a much earlier pattern of household formation, on average. The average time from marriage to split is almost three and a half years for Village A and nearly two years for Village B. The proportion of households formed in the first year follows a similar pattern: 33 per cent for Village A and 48 per cent for Village B. The higher degree of occupational diversity in Village B is probably responsible for the difference in household-formation pattern.

LANDHOLDING AND FAMILY STRUCTURE

The hypothesized causal link between landlessness and family structure rests on the empirical observation of difference in behaviour between sons of landless and landowning households: the tendency of landless sons to get married early and set up their own households (Cain 1978). Once sons become fully fledged income-earners they can exercise greater control over their own earnings as household heads than as members of their parents’ households. The following additional factors reinforce the connection between landholding and family living arrangements.

(1) The lure of jobs in the city, when it exists, may induce landless sons to migrate and thus precipitate their departure from the father’s household.

(2) Poverty, rather than landlessness per se, may deter sons from meeting their intergenerational obligations.

(3) Women in landless families are more likely to go out and work, thus bringing about fundamental change in the structure of dependence within families.

We have presented evidence in this paper to show that, despite evidence of rapidly increasing landlessness, the consequences for family structure have not been severe, particularly for the living arrangements of the elderly. There may be several explanations for this.

First, a pattern of joint household formation that requires only one son to co-reside with parents
allows families to maintain structures of support for the elderly by spreading the responsibility.

Secondly, landlessness has not induced the high rates of migration that may have been assumed when the link between landholding and family structure was proposed. Out-migration from rural areas has not been high in Bangladesh, and has been particularly low in the Rajshahi region where this study was undertaken.

Third, increasing landlessness has not been as impoverishing as projections based on 1970s data might have implied. Increased diversity in the rural economy and considerable growth in the non-agricultural sectors allow rural families to diversify rather than rely exclusively on land for sustenance. This increasing diversity, combined with the system of partible inheritance that grants each inheritor a parcel of land and homestead, no matter how small, means that even the most land-poor families are not pushed out of the village entirely.

Finally, Amin (1995) shows how the preservation of seclusion dictates that, while women in landless households work longer hours, the nature of their work is not radically different from women in landed households. Few women participate in the labour market, and the sanctions against women working alongside men in male occupations remain strong.

FAMILY RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF CHANGE

Extended family living arrangements and the virtual absence of alternative social networks are important factors in the persistence of the family as a source of support for the elderly. When a son separates from the parental household, he does not go far. He merely sets up a separate cooking arrangement, often choosing to build his own hut in the same compound. Thus, most households are surrounded by close kin. Sixty-eight per cent of households share a common courtyard with other family members. Figure 2 shows a sketch of a typical shared compound. It comprises four separate households, each with its own kitchen, with one common cowshed, courtyard, latrine, tubewell, and several jointly owned trees and bamboo groves. In addition to proximity of living, an additional degree of collectivism is encouraged by their joint ownership of land. Often the division of property is only notional, and there are no real boundaries.

Ninety-two per cent of the households in Village A and 84 per cent in Village B report that they own some land, usually inherited from a patrilineal source. Thus, the inheritance system and the system of property division dictate that close kin live in close proximity.

The proximity to kin is also reinforced by the almost total absence of residential rental markets. The idea that non-relatives might live at close quarters is considered an invasion of privacy. When circumstances force the introduction of an unrelated person into a compound, the custom is to establish fictive kin relations. For long-term residents, the usual strategy of gaining acceptance into a community is to establish relations by marriage.

The kin relationships among neighbours are usually patrilineal because the kinship system is patrilocal. The extent to which women inherit land and lay claim to their inheritance varies considerably between regions within Bangladesh. In the study area, women may exercise control over their inheritance, and a number of households own property inherited from the mother’s family. However, patrilocal residence dictates that daughters cannot be counted upon to take care of elderly parents.

Relations between households

Although members of a household are interdependent for day-to-day activities, members of an extended family are not. Within extended-living arrangement, the household, defined as persons eating from the same chula (hearth), has a clear and well-defined identity. The distribution of work and the division of labour within the household are the clearest indicators of the interdependence of members of the same household. The rigidity of a gender-based division of labour within households has been identified in the study area, and there is no real evidence of change when contrasted with data from Cain’s study (Amin 1995). Although a nuclear household within an extended family network is clearly different from the nuclear family in the occidental sense (not as autonomous or as independent) the distinct identity of each household (chula) within the extended network, particularly the interdependence of members of the same household, should not be underestimated.

The interdependence of the households of a homestead, or between parents and children in different households, is more evident at times of crisis. Interviews with elderly men and women who live in households separate from their sons revealed that the presence of a son nearby was an important consideration for them, even when they had strong notions of independence. One respondent high-
lighted health emergencies as his reason for wanting his sons nearby. He had gone to the extent of building new huts for all four of his sons in his compound after a flood had destroyed the old structure, so as to ensure that they would continue to live in the same compound. He built the new huts although all his sons had lived in separate households of their own for some time.

Most households share compounds with brothers of the household head and their families. As indicated above, when a son or brother splits from his parental household to form a separate household of his own, many facilities continue to be shared. Several types of work-sharing between households are common in the area, and may be based on formal or informal agreements. In the study villages, sons commonly have explicit share-cropping arrangements with their fathers. Share-cropping arrangements within the family are preferred to those with non-kin, probably because the partners have better information about each other and contract terms are more easily enforced. In numerous instances, sons work as paid labour (pait) on their father’s land. Such arrangements occur only when sons live in separate households. Cain did not record observations of such an arrangement in Char Gopalpur, and this may be an important point of difference between the two areas.

**IMPLICATIONS OF FAMILY CHANGE FOR FERTILITY DECLINE**

Evidence suggests that contraceptive use was minimal in the study area prior to the mid-1970s. By 1990–91, the annual period fertility in Village A was 3.99 births per woman of reproductive age, and in Village B it was 2.6 births, implying a rapid decline. Contraceptive levels were correspondingly high – 63 and 67 per cent, respectively.

A fertility decline as steep as that observed in our study area, or in Bangladesh more generally, cannot be explained by the relatively minor changes in family structure described in this paper. Better survival prospects for children undoubtedly lead to some revision in the number of sons desired, but sons remain critical to support of the elderly, and family living arrangements play an important role in this. Although landlessness weakens the functioning of the family as a source of welfare provision for the elderly, its impact has, so far, been offset by the concurrent change in the survivorship of sons to a considerable extent.

Increase in the proportion of nuclear households can be explained by the persistence of, rather than change in, a traditional joint household formation strategy. The physical proximity of households encourages a substantial amount of sharing of living arrangements, even after a joint household is split, so that setting up a nuclear living arrangement does not lead to emotional nucleation of households in the manner described by Caldwell (1976). Thus, family change attributable to, or led by, emotional nucleation is not a likely explanation of fertility decline.

No evidence exists of the increased numbers of female heads of household that are the subject of so many allusions in the literature. Nor is there much evidence of any substantial change in women’s work or of any increase in their autonomy (Amin 1995). Women have no incentive to seek autonomous living arrangements, because such arrangements remain an inferior alternative, even for women bereft of the protection of a husband or a son. On the contrary, women are found to be willing to accept highly compromised situations for the privilege of familial protection.

Discarding the idea that old-age security serves as a motive for childbearing may be premature. Although security motives did not prevent the onset of fertility decline, son preference and security objectives will probably remain relevant at all stages of the transition. A recent study from the Matlab project in eastern Bangladesh offers a description of how son preference affects fertility behaviour (Rahman and DaVanzo, 1993). The authors examined the influence of sex composition on fertility and concluded that, because Bengali parents want several sons and at least one daughter, son preference has a strong influence on contraceptive decision-making. They also showed that the impact of sex preference on fertility is stronger for couples who practice contraception and non-existent for those who do not. This difference explains why past studies, conducted when contraceptive levels were low, failed to show the impact of sex preference on fertility.

The general trend towards earlier formation of households may have indirect demographic ramifications for population momentum in the near future. Bangladesh has reached a high level of contraceptive use, and this accounts for most of the fertility decline. The contribution of delayed first births is minimal (Huq and Cleland 1990). Because age at first birth remains very low, a potential contribution exists for further fertility limitation through delayed births. Most of the future decline in population growth must come from delayed patterns of childbearing. Recent simulations of the
potential contribution of contraceptive use, changing desired family size, and changing age patterns of childbearing suggest that the contributions of delayed childbearing and longer mean length of generations would have greater demographic significance than any further increases in contraceptive use or changes in desired family size (Bongaarts 1994). To the extent that early household formation is associated with early marriage and childbirth, the observed patterns of family formation can be an obstacle to delayed childbearing.

Although changes in the family cannot explain the decline in fertility that is already underway, this decline may shape future family living arrangements. As fertility declines, and the dependency ratio of parents to sons increases, typical household structure will probably revert to one that is dominated by joint households.

In terms of policy, the strongest message to be gleaned from the study reported here is that, despite rapid fertility decline, families continue to be the sole source of support for the elderly in Bangladesh.

The data on family living arrangements show that the desire to have some specified number of sons still allows for substantial fertility decline, owing to improvements in child survival in the remote past and the survival of more sons to adulthood. Although a substantial fertility decline has taken place, a decline that is attributable to programme effort, fertility motives, at some level, may still incorporate security objectives for old age. The rapid reduction in fertility that has occurred, despite the remarkable persistence of family living arrangements, suggests that factors triggering a change in fertility behaviour may not be related to security motives, especially if latent demand for contraception was created by improved child survival in the past.

The persistence of traditional patterns of family living in Bangladesh is, to some extent, attributable to relatively low levels of development in rural areas and, in particular, to low levels of urbanization. However, there are strong similarities in family-formation patterns between Bangladesh and those in settings in Asia where economic and fertility change has been far more dramatic (Mason 1992). Such similarities attest to the resilience of the joint family-formation system.

To the extent that family planning programmes rely on campaigns promoting images of family and conjugal life, they should be designed to recognize the role of extended family networks and their centrality in the provision of welfare. The findings described in this paper echo the findings of other recent research on families that emphasize the need to retain a focus on families and networks of support in welfare policies (Bruce et al. 1995).

The reliance of the elderly on their sons for support and the role of sex-differentiated inheritance and partrilocal living arrangements in reinforcing that reliance should not constitute an argument for maintaining the status quo. Rather they should remind us of the need to promote greater equality of the sexes. One strategy would be to promote equal inheritance laws. Improvement in women’s access to income would also serve similar purposes, because much of the rationale for reliance on sons is grounded in the reality that a married daughter is herself dependent on her husband, and therefore unable to care for her parents.

At this stage of the fertility transition, efforts to delay marriage and childbirth may hold greater promise than further efforts to promote contraceptive use. Although marriage patterns have been slow to change, this study has shown that boys and girls who go to school tend to delay marriage. Thus education is a potent policy tool. From the point of view of parents and their concerns about old age, delayed marriage has the added appeal that it ensures later departure of sons from the parental household. Indeed, the delayed marriage of men may even strengthen the welfare function of families, to the extent that young men provide some level of support to their parents when they live in the parental home.

The development of stronger financial markets may serve as alternative sources of insurance to the family. In Bangladesh, several large-scale rural credit programmes have tried, by and large unsuccessfully, to introduce savings schemes for retirement. For these schemes to serve as viable alternatives to the family for the support of the elderly, they will have to become permanent features of the economy.

In Bangladesh, a strong familial system persists in spite of increasing land impoverishment, rapid fertility decline, the changing patterns of sons’ departure from their parental households, and a legacy of high population growth. The source of the family’s strength probably lies in the inequality of the power of the patriarch, whom the system has always served best.

NOTES

The Current Position, London, July 1995. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the annual meeting of the Population Association of America, San Francisco, 5-8 April 1995, Research Division Seminar of the Population Council and the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies. Data collection for this study was supported by grants to the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies from the Ford Foundation, Dhaka, and to the Population Council from the Rockefeller Foundation. The author gratefully acknowledges comments from Mead Cain, David Kertzer, Habibul Khondker, and Cynthia Lloyd on an earlier draft of this paper and from others attending the above-mentioned seminars.

Movement of urban migration in Bangladesh is to the metropolitan region around the capital city, Dhaka. The level of migration out of Rajshahi is low. The data on recent migrants to Dhaka show that fewer than 5 per cent of migrants come from the Rajshahi Division, most of whom are from the highly impoverished district of Rangpur in the north. Rajshahi Division accounts for 25 per cent of the total population of the country. Migration to Dhaka from Rajshahi District is practically non-existent (Arifeen and Mahbub, 1993).

These estimates are based on recall data on children born in the past year collected at the time of the initial census. The method of data collection was the same in both studies. The estimates probably suffer from some degree of recall error and are also based on a relatively small number of births. It is likely that these numbers underestimate the actual level of fertility for both studies.

White (1992) prefers the term “separate” to “nuclear,” which, she holds, has inappropriate Western connotations. Sixty per cent of households in her study area are separate, 14 per cent joint, 10 per cent extended, and a surprising 14 per cent single. Because she does not have a separate category for sub-nuclear, which category these households fall into is unclear.

Although the spatial pattern of villages varies across Bangladesh, the living arrangements of kin groups in compounds, called bare, are similar throughout rural Bangladesh.

A recent bill proposing reform in Islamic inheritance laws to grant equal privileges to daughters and sons came under vehement attack in the Bangladesh Parliament from religious political parties – the Jamaat-i-Islami and others. Such policies could not be implemented easily, but they could have long-lasting effects.

REFERENCES


