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Abstract

In 2010 I had the opportunity to travel to Bangladesh for six months as the graduate research assistant on a mostly-quantitative research project that sought to understand social factors surrounding the demographic transition (or, the change from high fertility rates to low fertility rates). As my major responsibility in the field, I worked with a Bangladeshi research assistant to coordinate ethnographic interviews to supplement the survey data we were collecting. During interviews we asked women to reflect on demographic and social change throughout their lives. It became clear to me that some interesting changes in familial and gender dynamics were taking place alongside the demographic transition, but the nature of the project I was working on was not conducive to exploring these changes further. My curiosity about women's lives and changing cultural expectations grew with each interview and, in the end, I walked away from the demographic questions. Because I have already built many relationships and have practice employing my methods at the proposed study site, I believe I can conclude data collection and transcription/translation within a 4-month timeframe.

In my previous interviews, research participants were making statements about how male out-migration for work in Dhaka and abroad is changing cultural expectations of women. One way that these changes manifest was an increased valuation of daughters relative to sons. Since returning to the U.S., I have analyzed the pieces of data from our interviews that are relevant to my current research interest. It is clear that cultural expectations of women are changing and a shift is occurring in child gender preference from the traditional preference of sons and possibly toward an increased valuation of daughters.

For my dissertation project, I plan to take advantage of my familiarity with the study population and my relationship with the ICDDR,B in Matlab in order to conduct my own set of 30 ethnographic interviews. My specific research questions for this project are as follows:

- (1) Are daughters valued more highly than sons in some families? What are the characteristics of such families? (i.e. Is the change more evident in families where sons are leaving for work abroad? What evidence is there that daughters are expected to take on family responsibilities left behind by sons?)
- (2) To what extent are women in rural Bangladesh expressing attitudes and behaviors that challenge son preference and other patriarchal norms? What social factors facilitate such challenges?
- (3) Is daughter valuation also increasing among rural families that adhere closely to traditional, patriarchal practices, including purdah, that limit women's contributions?