
Changing Intergenerational Transfers, Household Structure, and the Wellbeing of Elderly People in Bangladesh

Sarah C White

Centre for Development Studies

University of Bath, UK

Mead Cain's prophecy (1986)

- Ubiquity of population density and growth in publications on Bangladesh, 1970s and 80s
 - High infant mortality; children for labour and care in old age
 - 'the pursuit of individual security goals will continue to produce fertility rates that are well above replacement levels.'
-

Fertility decline

- Late 1970s 6.3 births per woman to 2.7 in 2007
 - Still no widespread functioning state provision of elderly care
 - What are the implications for the wellbeing of elderly people?
-

The Data:

- Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD) (wellddev.org.uk) 2002-7
 - Household questionnaire, 1500 households
 - Qualitative interviews with 70 respondents (mostly husbands and wives) on marriage, family and identity (2005-6)
 - Review of Bangladesh village studies (household structure) 1960s-1990s
-

Wellbeing

- **Material:** ‘stuff’ that enables wellbeing - food, shelter, physical care
 - **Relational:** relations of entitlement and obligation - patriarchal (age/gender hierarchy); kinship - reciprocal unequal exchange, which accomplishes key transitions (birth, marriage, death)
 - **Subjective:** thoughts and feelings: apon/por - measure of belonging/feelings of closeness
 - **Integrally inter-linked**
-

Changing intergenerational transfers: loosening parental control

- Narratives of decline/disorder (gender, generation)

Village studies show (though weakly):

- Smaller households
 - Fewer joint households (long term trend)
 - More fragmentary households
 - Elderly women particularly vulnerable
-

Education

- More children longer at school
 - Less child labour to family household
 - Financial cost to send children to school
 - Supervision of homework etc at home
 - Children more educated than parents
-

Marriage/Dowry

- More 'dekha-dekhi' marriage, with young couple playing a part in choice of partner
 - Spread and inflation of dowry:
 - Pre-mortem inheritance – not to daughter, but son-in-law
 - Parents have less money for control over own sons
-

Doubts about support

I don't like any more hassle at this old age. I hoped that my sons would grow up and get proper jobs and look after me. But how can they look after me? They don't have the capabilities. That's why I have to keep the shop at this old age. And it is I who have to think about my own belly. My sons are supposed to think about me, but it is I instead who have to think about them. I have to support their children. There are many people in the world, and even in this village, who are fed by their earning sons. They may be eating only lentils and rice; still they can pass their time by praying to Allah in their old age. I don't have anything like that in my fate. My time passes while I keep shop. When can I manage the time to pray to Allah?

Decline of affinity

- All do not remain *apon* always. At different times different people become *apon*..... Staying close means one becomes more attached. Moving away reduces it. Coming to one's husband's home after marriage, all in the in-laws' home become *apon* gradually. When children are born, the attachment to them becomes the strongest. Even now I feel attachment to all, I'm alone now. No-one is that *apon* any more. Now no-one needs me, but I need everyone.
 - As long as you have a body to work, then you'll have *apon* people; once your body is weak there is no-one left who is *apon*, not even your own son.
-

Conclusion

- Shifting terms of exchange from old to young – investments, control and entitlements
 - This leaves elderly people potentially very exposed, as ‘traditional’ forms of welfare provision less dependable, with no alternative available
 - Wellbeing offers valuable lens to view this problem: grounding in the relational, but important material and also subjective dimensions (alienation; sense of violation of norms, not the way it is supposed to be)
-