Bangladesh: Gender Equality and Social Transformation

Maitreyi Bordia Das
South Asia Sustainable Development Department
The World Bank
Washington DC
First round victories and second round challenges

- PRSP as the starting point
- Bangladesh is an outlier in so many respects – notably in health, education and the microcredit revolution
- But there are remaining areas – of political participation and access to the formal sphere more generally
What do we have to add?

- Bangladesh has been a virtual laboratory in the area of policy research on gender...what could we add?
- The context was a feeling that Bangladesh was veering towards conservatism
- Could we measure change over time?
- Could we address issues of violence, participation and identify new areas of challenge empirically?
The tussle between norms and opportunity

- Norms of seclusion (purdah) and son preference have historically been blamed for poor outcomes for women in South Asia.
- Could we measure norms?
- Are norms immutable? Or does opportunity mediate successfully? For instance, what do young garment workers show us?
- Can policy address norms or create incentives that would change norms?
- Classic tussle between whether behavior changes first or norms.
Narrative of social change

- Tracking change without a baseline is almost impossible
- So we adopted used a mix of innovative survey methods – quantitative national survey and qualitative field work in addition to analyzing large national data sets
- In terms of process we wanted to be relevant to government but also to lobbyists and provide empirical evidence for further change
- So our analysis is grounded in the national discourse
Health and education have been written about at length – we use the dramatic growth in education as a hook to understand other outcomes.

Focus on change in norms and attitudes.

Identifying key areas of change and emerging challenges, with regional variations.
Figure 4.1: Female Gross Secondary Enrollment for Low Income countries

Source: SIMA, 2005
Education

- Enrollment rates doing well - remaining issues of quality, drop-out rates
- Others ask...how can we improve the quality of education, and we ask - what has education done to the social landscape?
- Qualitative evidence - “nijer paaye danrano” and “ability to speak”...but also compromising “lojja” and tradition
- But...also changing norms regarding education of sons and daughters - pointers for future demand and progress
Attitudes to equal education for girls and boys
Or Sylheti women’s yearning for education?
Source: World Bank staff estimates controlling for background characteristics
(WBSGN 2006)
Bangladesh: More women marrying men less educated than them
Bangladesh: Attitudes to gender equality

- Will consider living with daughter
- Will consider receiving financial help from daughter
- Women should have right to divorce

Percent

Older women (45-60)  Younger women (15-25)  Men
Health

Bangladesh: Progress in mortality faster than any comparator country
Source: Calculated from World Population Prospects 2004

Bar chart showing absolute changes in life expectancy and IMR for men, women, boys, and girls in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and less developed regions.
Percent births attended by skilled birth attendant in South Asia

Source: WDI 2005
Bangladesh: Trends in LFP by age-group 19995-96 to 2002-03

Source: Das, 2006 based on LFS

FLFP has doubled from 1995-2004 but still low at 26%

Younger women's LFP increasing
Younger men's LFP decreasing

Dashed line is base 1995-96 and solid line 2002-03
Figure 5.7: Bangladesh - Adjusted Relationship between Education and Labor Force Participation (Individuals 20-55 and not Attending School)

Note: All odds ratios sig. at .001 level except primary ed. for men.

Source: Das, 2006 Based on LFS 2003 Controlling for Background Characteristics and Region
Changing labor market

- Dramatic rise in FLFPR in last decade, but levels are low compared even to SAR standards
- Low access to wage work in general
- Growth driven by community and service sector
- Dynamic story with education leading to greater participation – different from India & West Bengal
- But poor women's access to employment limited - largely explained by low importance of agr. in women’s employment
- …which affects structure of the casual labor market - women have a disadvantage at both entry and wages
Violence: A serious hindrance to development

Figure 7.1: Women’s Comparative Attitudes to Violence

- Serbia and Montenegro city
- Brazil city
- Japan city
- Namibia city
- Peru city
- Brazil province
- Thailand city
- Bangladesh city (Dhaka)
- United Republic of Tanzania city
- United Republic of Tanzania province
- Thailand province
- Samoa
- Peru province
- Bangladesh province (Matlab)
- Ethiopia province

% agreeing with one of the reasons

Source: WHO Multi Country Study 2005
But measuring violence is difficult

- Not only is it difficult to say if violence is on the rise but its even difficult to measure its prevalence
- Violence is associated with a number of negative consequences on health and well-being of women and the family
- Also, its not just women who experience violence….but here we address only violence against women
- By international comparisons, Bangladeshi women tend to condone violence more and do not seek help as often
Empirical results

- Women say they have experienced violence less often than men say they have been violent (both in our survey and DHS).
- Qualitative evidence seems to suggest that violence is on the decline.
- Women who condone violent behavior also seem much less likely to say they have experienced violence.
- At the divisional level too, regions where women’s attitudes condone violence also show low perception of insecurity.
Figure 7.2: Older Women Ever Experienced Spousal Violence

 Violence against women in marriage: Older cohort women

- 0.00 - 0.06
- 0.07 - 0.17
- 0.18 - 0.30
- 0.31 - 0.44
- 0.45 - 0.60
- No Data

Note: a) Women aged 45-60
b) Darker color denotes worse outcomes

Violence against women in marriage: Younger cohort women

- 0.00 - 0.06
- 0.07 - 0.24
- 0.25 - 0.34
- 0.35 - 0.45
- 0.46 - 0.79
- No Data

Note: a) Women aged 15-25
b) Darker color denotes worse outcomes
Perceptions of insecurity

OLDER WOMEN FEEL Safe GOING OUT IN THE SETTLEMENT

Feel safe within settlement: Older cohort women
- 0.80 - 1.00
- 0.63 - 0.79
- 0.43 - 0.62
- 0.20 - 0.42
- 0.00 - 0.19
- No Data

Note: a) Women aged 45-60
b) Darker color denotes worse outcomes

YOUNGER WOMEN FEEL Safe GOING OUT IN THE SETTLEMENT

Feel safe within settlement: Younger cohort women
- 0.70 - 0.90
- 0.48 - 0.69
- 0.32 - 0.47
- 0.14 - 0.31
- 0.00 - 0.13
- No Data

Note: a) Women aged 15-25
b) Darker color denotes worse outcomes
Dowry: the new preoccupation

- Marriage is universal and stable
- Age at marriage is changing very slowly
- But it does not seem to have hampered other trends
- The new preoccupation of girls and their families is dowry

Bangladesh: The practice of dowry has increased over time
(based on whether dowry worth Tk500 or above was paid)
Figure 8.5: Younger Women (15-25) Who Had to Pay Dowry

Note: Darker color denotes worse outcomes
Assets: Ingrained cultural issues and change

Bangladesh: Women's access to property

Parental property: Denied or voluntarity given up
- Older women (45-60): 38.7
- Younger women (15-25): 11.9

Marital property: Name on homestead ownership/rental papers
- Older women (45-60): 15.9
- Younger women (15-25): 2.7
Political participation

- Reservation of seats in local governments
- Structure of reservations is “flawed” in that it does not give those elected through the quotas the same rights as those elected
- Participation in informal processes like shalish – access to conflict resolution emerges as an important demand
What’s the big picture?

- Far reaching changes in Bangladesh - both structural and cultural
- Many cultural practices are being renegotiated or are reinventing themselves
- Some positive changes have perhaps led to “second generation” issues
- Remaining “first generation” issues like maternal and child mortality, access to markets, assets and formal spaces can significantly change outcomes for women
- There is both intrinsic and instrumental value in addressing these as part of the broader development agenda for Bangladesh
Next Steps: Access to markets, better services and “spaces”

- From the informal to formal
- Credit, land, labor markets
- Political participation
- Decision-making
- Access to justice