Published in final edited form as:

J Dev Stud. 2010 March ; 46(3): 379–396. doi:10.1080/00220380903318095.

Women's Empowerment across Generations in Bangladesh

Sidney Ruth Schuler and Elisabeth Rottach

Academy for Educational Development, USA

Abstract

This study uses qualitative data to examine young women's relationships with their mothers and mothers-in-law to understand how these relationships foster empowerment in the younger generation or fail to do so. The data consist of ethnographic interviews with 20 triads of women—young married women, their mothers and their mothers-in-law. Findings show that the influence of empowerment across generations was greater in the sphere of economic empowerment and education than in relation to marriage and childbearing. The study illustrates how patriarchal institutions resistant to change can limit the effects of women's empowerment on the next generation.

Introduction

The empowerment of women has been widely acknowledged as an important goal in international health and development. The International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994 and the 1995 Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women underscored the role of women's empowerment in shaping health outcomes and demographic processes. More than a decade has passed since these meetings, during which time theoretical and empirical work on empowerment has expanded and policy interest endured. One of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG) is to 'promote gender equality and empower women.' Many international bilateral and multilateral donors, such as the World Bank and the United Nations, now include women's empowerment as an element in their health and development strategies. If women's empowerment truly is an important factor with the potential to influence health and social outcomes, then it should be possible to see the effects of empowerment extend over time and resonate across generations, especially within the family – yet few studies have examined this.

Cross-Generational Influences

Women's empowerment in various aspects of life has been documented in Bangladesh and many other countries, but the research literature has largely overlooked the possibility that empowered women may support gender equity and better health among women in the next generation. The exception to this is the literature that looks at cross-generational effects of women's education on health-related behaviours. The literature from South Asia addressing the role of intergenerational relationships in women's health focuses mainly on the harmful influence of mothers-in-law on the health and well-being of young married women. Mothers-in-law are described as wielding considerable influence over their daughters-in-law in such matters as the timing of first childbirth (Jeffery et al., 1989), use of prenatal care and other health services (Kadir et al., 2003), and subjection to domestic violence (Jeffery et al., 1989). Das Gupta (1996) argues that mothers-in-law in India contribute to the ill health of younger married women by withholding nourishment and medical care.

Bender and McCann (2000) found that mothers' education had a positive effect on daughters' prenatal care and family planning in Bolivia; Bhuyan (1991) found that adoption of family planning increased with the educational level of mothers-in-law in Bangladesh; Maitra (2004) found that mothers' education had an effect on daughters' ages at marriage in Nepal; and Bates et al. (2007) found that women's education influenced the timing of marriage and childbearing in the next generation. Other literature (Govindasamy and Malhotra, 1996; Mason, 1995) suggests, however, that female education alone may be an insufficient indicator of women's empowerment. In some cases it appears to function as a proxy for socio-economic status of the family and geographic area of residence (Desai and Alva, 1998).

Conceptual and measurement issues

The conceptual treatment and measurement of the phenomenon of empowerment remains contentious. For example, at one end of the spectrum, Batliwala (2007) argues that the concept, used in radical social movements such as women's movements beginning in the 1970s, was subsequently depoliticized and subverted, implying that the term as it has been employed in most literature since the 1980s has little meaning and therefore probably is not worth measuring at all. Taking a somewhat less radical stance in reflecting on the measurement of progress toward the third MDG on gender equality and women's empowerment, Kabeer (2005) contends that common indicators associated with this goal such as women's access to education, share of non-agricultural wage employment and political participation can contribute to women's empowerment but may do so only in a very limited way. She gives the example of women's access to education, arguing that unless it is provided in a way that can give women the courage to question unjust practices (such giving women themselves opportunities to participate, monitor, and hold policy makers and corporations accountable) for their actions, its potential for bringing about meaningful change will be limited. A review by Malhotra and Schuler (2005) highlights a disjunction between the conceptual and empirical literature on empowerment. In much of the conceptual literature, empowerment is characterized as the ability to exercise agency (define one's goals and act upon them) by making strategic life choices—decisions that influence a person's life trajectory and subsequent ability to exercise agency and make choices (e.g., [Kabeer 2001]). Examples would include decisions related to marriage, education, employment, and childbearing. As such choices are relatively infrequent in a person's life, it is often difficult to link them with other variables of interest unless the research time frame is quite long. Most household-level studies therefore use indicators of women's empowerment that reflect what might be termed "empowerment in small matters" (e.g., mobility and involvement in day-to-day household decisions) rather than strategic choices, with an implicit assumption that the two are linked. Empirical research provides relatively little evidence that this assumption is valid.

Preliminary research

Using a combination of indicators representing strategic life choices and more mundane matters, in 2003, we undertook statistical analyses to test the hypothesis that empowerment in one generation of women would have a positive influence on the lives of grown daughters and daughters-in-law, using data from surveys we had carried out in 1994 and 2002 in six villages. The respondents included 876 mother - daughter pairs and 352 mother-in-law - daughter-in-law pairs. The analyses were based on responses to a wide range of questions about women's empowerment in various domains of life that were aggregated into a set of empowerment-related variables. Contrary to expectations, no clear overall pattern emerged from these analyses. There were no dimensions of empowerment that had statistically significant, consistent effects on a wide range of second-generation outcomes. Nor was there a particular subset of second-generation outcomes that was highly influenced by senior women's empowerment. The greatest effects were seen in younger women's access to opportunities outside the home, but only in the case of involvement of daughters-in-law in microcredit

organizations were many mother-in-law empowerment variables significant (Schuler et al. 2004). In a subsequent analysis, senior women's education was associated with later marriage and childbearing among daughters and daughters-in-law. Empowerment did not appear to mediate these relationships, although mother's empowerment (based on an aggregate measure) was independently correlated with later marriage Bates et al. (2007). These ambiguous results might have indicated shortcomings in our quantitative measures of empowerment, or a disinclination on the part of mothers and mothers, for whatever reason, in law to invest in the empowerment of daughters and daughters-in-law, or their inability to succeed in doing so.

Purpose of Study

In light of these findings, we undertook a qualitative study to: (1) Re-examine the concept of women's empowerment, and the salience of specific empowerment indicators in a period of normative change; (2) Explore the socio-cultural processes through which women influence strategic life choices affecting women's health and well-being (3) Investigate whether, and how, institutions and processes resistant to change may be undermining women's empowerment and its transmission and effects across generations. We elected to use qualitative methods because we believe they are better suited for understanding the social processes underlying statistical relationships. This paper presents findings related to objectives (2) and (3). We define women's empowerment as the capacity to exercise agency and make strategic life choices in a context where women's agency is constrained by an inequalitarian gender system.

The study, carried out in 2006-2007, uses a set of indicators representing a wide range of empowerment dimensions. It investigates whether "empowerment in small matters" operates across generations by influencing strategic life choices made on behalf of daughters (specifically, choices about education and marriage), and strategic choices made by daughters-in-law and others about the timing of childbearing. Additionally, the study examines the processes through which the ability to exercise agency in both smaller and larger life matters is transferred to the next generation. This study focuses mainly on the latter.

Research Design and Methods

Sites

Rural Bangladesh is a particularly appropriate site for this research in light of the persistence of early marriage and childbearing because interventions potentially contributing to women's empowerment (including microcredit, female education, and community-based health and family planning services) have been underway on a large scale for close to two decades, and because women's empowerment has been documented in various contexts. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, microcredit programs rapidly expanded in rural areas of the country, and many in the development field believed that they were empowering the women who participated in them. In the health sector, massive efforts were made during the 1980s and 1990s to bring high-impact primary health care interventions to women and children, such as oral rehydration, child immunization, and family planning. Bangladesh is well known in the fields of population and development for its rapid fertility decline from over six to just over three children between the late 1970s and the early 1990s (NIPORT et al. 2001).

The research sites are three villages in Faridpur, Magura, and Rangpur districts where the authors have been conducting research since 1991. Comparison of our 2002 survey data with rural statistics from the 1999-2000 Demographic and Health Survey suggests that the villages are not atypical in the context of rural Bangladesh (Bates et al. 2004).

Interview samples

Open-ended, in-depth interviews were conducted with triads of women (interviewed individually) -- young married women, their mothers, and their mothers-in-law -- with husbands and fathers-in-law interviewed to get additional perspectives¹. In all, 89 individuals were interviewed. Our initial universe for selecting the triads was all women with at least one son or daughter who married within the past five years but more than one year ago, so that recent decisions about marriage and childbearing initiation would have taken place. An additional criterion for inclusion was that the other senior woman in the triad (the young married woman's mother as well as her mother-in-law) should be living.

From the list of senior women in the three villages who met the above criteria, we randomly selected 10 mothers and 10 mothers-in-law who seemed to be the most empowered based on indicators measured in our 2002 survey. To reduce ambiguity in examining the role of empowerment in cross-generational processes, we included only the most empowered women--those whose empowerment scores fell in the top 25%. Although the decision to establish 25% as the cut-off point is somewhat arbitrary, it is consistent with the field research team's subjective assessment. Their impression based on our qualitative research is that about 20%–25% in the six villages stand out as being more empowered than the rest. The percentage would be somewhat higher or lower depending on the village. A composite score ranging from zero to seven was created for the purpose of identifying the 25% most empowered using seven empowerment indicators, most of which represent empowerment in small matters.²

Since most marriages are exogamous, most daughters and their mothers-in-law, as well as the daughters-in-laws' mothers, were residing outside the primary study villages and, thus, nearly half of the above sample came from outside the three villages (Figure 1). A final criterion for selection was that study participants living outside the three villages had to be living within a two hour journey of a primary village using locally available means of transportation. In the course of carrying out the interviews, we found that the supply of triads in which all three women were available for interview and agreed to be interviewed (two women refused) exhausted the universe defined by the criteria, so in one case we substituted a triad where the young woman had married six rather than five years prior. One case was dropped because the mother did not want us to interview her out married daughter and mother-in-law owing to strained relations between the two families. Several others could not be interviewed because of labour migration. Thus, although we started by using a random selection process the result was a total census of triads who met the selection criteria, with the addition of two extra cases where the marriage had taken place 6-7 rather than 5 years earlier, and one incomplete triad (no mother-in-law). Two of the women were interviewed both as mothers and as mothers-in-law.

We determined the empowerment status of the additional women in the triads by administering the empowerment module from our 2002 survey, as these women were living outside the primary study sites and therefore were not included in that survey. The result was a final sample of 14 empowered mothers, six unempowered mothers, 11 empowered mothers-in-law and eight unempowered mothers-in-law, double-counting the two interviewed both in mother triads and mother-in-law triads (Table 1).

In addition, a sample of nine senior women (mothers and mothers-in-law) and nine younger women (married daughters and daughters-in-law of the senior women) was randomly selected, half from among the 25% with the lowest empowerment scores and half from among the 25%

¹This paper is based exclusively on the women's interviews.

²1) Mobility; 2) Economic security; 3) Ability to make small purchases; 4) Ability to make large purchases; 5) Political and legal awareness; 6) Freedom from domination by the family; 7) Involvement in major decisions (see Schuler et al., 1997 for further details).

with the highest empowerment scores, from two of the six villages for a qualitative validation of our quantitative empowerment indicators.

Interview topics

The open-ended, in-depth interviews explored how active and effective women who scored high on empowerment were in delaying the marriages of their daughters and the first pregnancies and births of their daughters-in-law, and in contributing to the empowerment of the younger women. We examined: (a) Strategic life choices made by mothers (or jointly by mothers and other relatives) on behalf of their children (e.g., regarding education, ages at marriage, spouse's characteristics); (b) The influence of mothers and mothers-in-law over decisions and behaviours of married children and children-in-law (e.g., regarding the timing of childbearing, use of contraception); (c) mothers' and mothers-in-law' direct actions (e.g., giving a daughter or daughter-in-law contraceptives); and (d) mothers' and mothers-in-law' roles in shaping the next generation's attitudes and expectations (by serving as a role model or by establishing egalitarian gender norms within the family).

Data collection and analysis

The five field researchers (three women, two men) were well known in the study communities, and had excellent rapport with local residents as well as skill in building rapport with new respondents. Except in a few cases where study participants preferred not to be taped, interviews were tape recorded. The field researchers also took notes after each interview describing the setting, "body language," and other observations and incorporated these notes into the transcribed interviews, which were then translated into English.

Case studies were prepared by compiling and comparing the triads of young married women, their mothers and their mothers-in-law along with husbands and/or fathers. Where applicable, we also included data on the marriages of other children in addition to the recently married daughter/daughter-in-law who was interviewed directly. The English transcripts were also coded by theme using an ethnographic software package, SPData, to enable a systematic assessment of supporting and counter-evidence for interpretations derived from the review of triad cases.

Findings

Robustness of the empowerment measures

Qualitative assessments of the sampled women who scored in the top 25% on empowerment in our 2002 survey suggested that, with the exception of one ambiguous case, all of these women were in fact empowered in terms of their capacity to exercise agency and make strategic life choices. Thus, we do not believe that our previous failure to detect a consistent pattern of cross-generational effects of women's empowerment among daughters and daughters-in-law in statistical models is explained by weaknesses in the quantitative empowerment measures we used in 2002.

Nonetheless, quantitative assessments using the same empowerment module that was administered in 2002 showed that among the 17 women scoring in the top 25% in 2002 for whom we have data in 2007, six women were no longer in the top quartile. Four women were still in the top 50%, and two were in the third quartile. The explanation for the drop in some scores is probably that the overall level of empowerment in the study communities increased between 1994 and 2005 (Bates et al. 2005) and for some reason these women did not continue to advance, or even became less empowered. In light of the qualitative assessments showing strong evidence of empowerment among these women, we decided for the tabulations in this

paper to count a woman as empowered if she scored in the top quartile either in 2002 or in 2007.

Mothers' contributions to daughters' empowerment prior to marriage

Findings from the study showed that mothers fostered their unmarried daughters' empowerment in one main domain, education. Most empowered mothers in our sample valued education and saw it as a way for their daughters to improve their lives, either by marrying into a more well-off family and/or developing life skills. One mother explained "The future of my kids requires education. Who would marry the children of a poor person like me? People want to marry someone who is educated these days." Another mother said "Education is necessary. If we don't teach her then we won't be able to get her married to an educated groom." A third mother used to tell her daughter "...carry on your schooling. And I will try my best to support you. But you'll have to be educated. I am an illiterate person. I don't understand things properly. You will be educated and then you won't make mistakes like I did." A daughter of another empowered woman said "Our father never told us to go to school, or to read and write. Our mom used to do everything for our education; she used to buy all the books and notebooks for us and would send us to school. If we refused to do our homework, she would scold us."

Out of the 14 empowered mothers, 13 valued education and 10 were able to promote their daughter's education in various ways. These included buying school supplies, verbally encouraging their daughter to attend classes and to do homework, and engaging private tutors. One woman tearfully explained in her interview that she now realized her mistake and regretted her decision not to educate her daughter. Another woman wanted to send her daughter to school but was unable to give her any education due to her husband's forbiddance, and a third could not afford financially to educate her daughter more than a couple of years. Only one woman gave evidence that she did not care to educate her daughter. The difference between the two generations of women in their levels of education is striking. The average years of schooling for the junior women in the 2002 survey was 6.9 (range = 0-12), compared with 1.7 among the senior women (range = 0-8). This difference is statistically significant. This mirrors the trend in the country as a whole, where primary school enrolment doubled between 1985 and 2001, reaching a rate of 98%, with parity between boys and girls (World Bank 2003). As Table 2 shows, most women, regardless of their empowerment level, valued education.

In two cases, mothers fostered a second domain of empowerment, economic empowerment, and encouraged their daughters to become income earners. In one case, after marrying her eldest daughter at a young age, the mother decided to "think more boldly" and sent her daughters to work in a local thread mill instead of marrying them early. In another case, an empowered woman who was in our sample of mothers-in-law was also asked about her own daughters. She had sent them to work in a garment factory in Dhaka three years earlier, when the elder girl was 17 and the younger 14 years old. Asked why she sent them to work instead of getting them married, she told us that their father had died and she had been working in road construction for an NGO, CARE, which provided education on the disadvantages and risks associated with early marriage and childbearing. Moreover, she had only one son and she thought his income was insufficient for dowry. She told her daughters to work and save money for their own marriages in the conviction that women derived power from earning their own income. "I told them," she said, "you should become independent. Many girls have gone to Dhaka to work and they have become independent. They are earning and getting married with the savings from their earnings. You should do something like they are doing."

The interruption of girls' education by early marriage

Despite wanting to educate their daughters and despite their knowledge of the disadvantages and risks of early marriage and childbearing, most of the empowered women in our sample

had recently gotten a young daughter married or recently married a son to an underage girl: among the recently married daughters of the 14 empowered mothers sampled, seven were married when they were 10-14 years of age, and six 15 – 17. (One was 18).

Many of the parents explained their decisions to marry off daughters early as a rational response to the pressures of poverty, which often made parents risk averse and fearful that their ability to marry their daughters well could be undermined by gossip, slander or an unfortunate turn of fate. Thus some mothers, fathers, or both, were inclined to seize upon a reasonable opportunity to marry a daughter, especially if there was no dowry demand. Moreover, in this society it remains socially unacceptable to keep a mature daughter at home if she is not in school. When a family cannot afford the private tutoring that is almost essential for a student to do well and pass exams, it is difficult to keep the girl in school (Schuler 2007). Once out of school the only socially acceptable option most families see is marriage. And in a substantial number of cases (five sons of the nine empowered mothers-in-law in the original sample), young men wanted to marry and forced the decision on their parents and the parents of their bride to be, for example by threatening suicide (Schuler et al., in press).

Senior women's roles in delaying childbearing

Many of the mothers regretted their young daughters' early marriages and subsequently tried to get their daughters to delay childbearing. In most cases they failed because their power was less than that of the daughter's husband and mother-in-law, or they subsequently changed their minds for fear that oral contraceptives would make their daughter infertile, a very common belief in our research sites (also see Schuler et al. 2006b) and that, if she did become infertile, the young man would take another wife.

One mother explained, "I already told you, Apa, that it doesn't take much to make the girls of today understand. If you go to several houses you'll see that none of the women's daughters has more than two children. But there is one problem and that is that they conceive right after marriage. Apa, this can't be stopped. If we try to stop it then the girl's in-laws would say that she's a barren woman and they would begin looking for another girl to remarry their son to."

Also common were cases in which the mother-in-law wanted to delay her daughter-in-law's first child but failed either because of poor communication or because the son was eager to have children. Many of the mothers-in-law in the study were ashamed to speak directly to their sons and daughters-in-law regarding sex and contraception. In some cases mothers-in-law suggestions to delay childbearing were so vague and indirect that they apparently were not understood or were not helpful. Rather than speak directly to the daughter-in-law a mother-in-law might ask a sister-in-law or other relative to speak to the young woman, or might make remarks intending them to be overheard.

Several mothers-in-law (as well as mothers) said that there was no need to speak to their daughters-in-law (or daughters) about family planning because young people now knew more than the older generation, but judging from the number of unplanned and unwanted pregnancies in the sample (nine of the 20 of the young married women got pregnant unintentionally and another five were dominated by husbands or others) they may not have known as much as was presumed. In the words of one empowered mother whose daughter got pregnant and had a stillbirth at the age of 15, "Nowadays girls are very mature. They know and understand everything. There are various kinds of injections, pills and condoms for birth control. Nobody needs to teach the girls about these things—they know themselves...I thought that like other girls my daughter knew about all these things. These issues are broadcast on radio and television. I couldn't guess that my daughter paid no attention and didn't learn these things." Only after she conceived, a young mother told us, did she learn that her mother-in-law too had wanted the first birth to be delayed. (This contradicted the mother-in-law's account. The

mother-in-law said that before the daughter-in-law became pregnant she had counselled her to wait several years.)

Roles of young men in early childbearing

In some cases, young married men inhibited the potential influence of their mothers and MILS in delaying first childbirths. Some mothers were unable to stand up to their own sons (“I didn’t give her any suggestion thinking my son might not take that easily”/“My son had separated from us—he was beyond our control”). Similarly, mothers of young brides often were afraid to give direct advice to their sons-in-law. In a few cases, young married men wanted their wives to get pregnant to tie them to the marriage. In one instance both the young man’s mother and his mother-in-law decided that his young wife should delay childbearing and continue with her education, but the young man said to his mother, “If your daughter-in-law leaves me after pursuing her education what will I do then?... She has no need to carry on her schooling to such an extent!... I am an illiterate person. If she gets an education she may not want to live with me!” (Marriages in which the wife has more education than her husband are becoming increasingly prevalent—World Bank 2008.)

An empowered mother-in-law who worked for a prominent NGO had wanted her 16 year-old daughter-in-law to wait a few years before having a child, thinking that she wanted to save money and build a separate room for the couple to live in, but the girl conceived a year after her marriage. “Someone put the idea in my son’s head that his wife would not be able to get loose if he could make her pregnant,” she explained. Her daughter-in-law told us she had wanted to continue her education and wait five years before having a baby, “When I began to press my husband about continuing in school he replied, ‘There is no baby in our house. It is time—we should take a baby!’... Husbands have an apprehension in their minds that their wives may leave them and go off with someone else, so they try to make the relationship permanent by having a child. Because if a girl has a child she can’t just leave the child and go away.”

Mothers’ support of daughters’ empowerment after marriage

In contrast to their lack of efficacy in delaying their daughters’ marriages and first childbirths, most of the empowered mothers did help empower their daughters economically. Traditionally, mothers-in-law in Bangladesh have wielded great influence over the decisions and lives of daughters-in-law, with little opportunity for the mother to exert influence. One reason for this is the common practice of village exogamy and patrilocality which separates many girls from their natal families. In our 2002 survey only about 1/5 of the younger women had married within their own villages. Young brides, uprooted and sent to their husbands’ villages, are often left with little or no decision-making power regarding childbearing, education, and other aspects of their lives. However, the findings from this study suggest that this traditional family dynamic may be slowly changing, as empowered mothers begin to play influential roles in the lives of their daughters after marriage and encourage them to exercise at least a small amount of autonomy and build economic security for themselves.

Many of the mothers who had married off their underage daughters, especially those who were themselves empowered, subsequently took other steps to continue their daughters’ schooling and/or support their economic empowerment. For example, one empowered mother, after being pressured for months by her son-in-law’s family to marry her daughter eventually agreed. The young girl, married at age 14, became pregnant within a few months of marriage. The mother, although unable to delay marriage and childbearing, has been successful in fostering her daughter’s empowerment post-marriage. When asked why her daughter decided to join BRAC, a micro-lending organization, the mother stated “I advised her... She was about to become a mother and she did not have money in hand. I told her that the time when delivery happens involves lot of dangers and uncertainties. I advised her to borrow five thousand taka. If you

have some money in hand, you can move with confidence seeking help during this uncertain period.” She stated “I told them to make the house with the instalment money this time, then try to make the rickshaw-van of their own through the payment of the instalments. And then they can borrow tk. 50,000 and buy a cow and rear that. Thus I advised them.” The daughter agreed in her interview that her mother advised her how to save and invest her money, as well as improve her household, and said that she follows her suggestions.

One daughter greatly acknowledged the positive impact her mother’s involvement has had on her life since her marriage at the age of 13. In her interview, she said boastfully “My maa does give good advice but we cannot prosper due to my husband. He spends half of what he earns for eating in the market and I somehow manage to run the family by the rest. In the meantime, my maa has opened a savings scheme for me where I keep 20 taka in every week... Had my maa not been there, my life would have been different. This is evident from what I see in my surroundings. Girls give birth to child in the very year they got married and their health breaks down. No progress in the *sangsar* (family/household). I don’t have want in my sangsar even though my husband does not bring home all he earns.”

Some women spoke of wanting their daughters to be ‘self-reliant,’ and said that earning income can increase their value within their families. One mother stated that earning money “increases her value, her importance in the family. Her husband will observe that she works and earns money; she doesn’t waste her time sitting around without doing anything. He will realize that his wife works as hard as he does. So, he will know that he needs to give importance to what his wife says. Besides, you can’t always ask for money from your husband. If I also earn some money, then I’ll have cash in my hand. Then there won’t be any problem.” The mother continually encouraged her daughter to earn money and contribute financially to her family. According to the daughter, this made a big impact on her, and as a result she attended a tailoring training and now earns money by sewing saris, sheets and coverings. She explained “My mother always used to say that when a woman earns income, that brings continuous prosperity in her family all the time. It is this comment of her that made a deep impression on my mind.”

Another daughter explained how her mother exposed her to many experiences by taking her to places around town and sending her to trainings. She continued to encourage her to enrol in Open University. She said “My mother always wanted to make sure that I never become helpless or incompetent in my life.” Although her husband had refused to allow her to attend Open University, she continued to push him to permit her to attend.

Mothers-in-law’ support of daughters-in-law’ empowerment after marriage

Much less common but still noteworthy were cases in which mothers-in-law sought to empower their underage daughters-in-law, either through schooling or other means. One mother-in-law, regretful that she was not allowed to continue her own education beyond class 5, said that she did not want her daughter-in-law to also miss out on an education. She was highly supportive of her daughter’s education, even though the daughter was married and was a mother herself, and admitted her under Open University to pursue her B.A. degree. Another mother-in-law supported her daughter-in-law to work in a garment factory although she met with opposition from her son, as well as questions from neighbours. She stated “My son did not agree to let her go there. Then I said, ‘why shouldn’t she go there? Let her go. What will she do by staying at home? I can do all house-hold activities. Better that the daughter-in-law have a job. And you do your business’... [The neighbours said] ‘they have sent their daughter-in-law to do jobs.’ Then I told them, ‘my daughter-in-law will go to sew garments, not to do immoral activities.’” Other studies too suggest that the garment industry has played an important role in changing attitudes in relation to changing economic opportunities for women (Amin et al. 1998). In this case, the support of the mother-in-law clearly played a significant role in her daughter-in-law’s ability to work outside the home.

Another mother-in-law explained “Does anyone stay inside the house inactive after earning so many degrees and educational qualification? No. She would do some job. Besides, every girl needs her freedom, self-dependency. There’s a huge difference between earning your own living and depending on your husband’s income for your living.” She also encouraged her daughter-in-law to manage the household accounts. In her interview she said she told her son “You should give your earnings to your wife. She will spend the money according to our family needs. You should only keep pocket money in your hand and you should give the rest of the money to your wife.” Her daughter-in-law now manages the household finances.

The role of empowerment in cross-generational influences after marriage

Empowered mothers made more attempts to influence junior women’s empowerment after marriage than those who were less empowered. Additionally, the range of empowerment domains that mothers (and to some extent mothers-in-law) encouraged post-marriage was greater than before marriage, including continued education, participation in women’s groups organized by NGOs, earning money in various ways to become more self-reliant, and investing money to build resources. As shown in Table 3, of the 25 empowered senior women, the majority made attempts to foster empowerment (17 women) or encouraged their daughters or daughters-in-law to delay childbearing (an additional six women). Mothers, particularly those who were themselves empowered, took a much greater role in fostering empowerment and influencing other areas of their daughter’s lives compared to mothers-in-laws. All 14 of the empowered mothers made an attempt to foster their daughters’ empowerment after marriage. Few of the unempowered mothers supported their daughters’ empowerment after marriage and none of the four women scoring in the bottom empowerment quartile played an active role in their daughters’ or daughters’-in-law lives, either by fostering empowerment or influencing decisions related to initiation of childbearing (latter not shown). Empowered mothers-in-law were no more likely than unempowered mothers-in-law to support the empowerment of their daughters-in-law.

Discussion

We undertook this qualitative study to explore possible explanations as to why we did not see a greater cross-generational effect of women’s empowerment in statistical analyses. The first was that our measures of empowerment were weak or no longer relevant. The second was that the transmission of empowerment was being subverted by aspects of gender inequality that were resistant to change. Our qualitative findings suggest the latter explanation, with some qualification—the aspect of gender inequality resistant to change being the institution of marriage and the social and economic norms associated with it.

Was our sample of empowered women really empowered? Is empowerment still a relevant concept in this setting, and did we capture it in the indicators we developed in 1991 and employed in our 2002 survey? A separate analysis from the same study (Schuler & Rottach, 2010) suggests that a number of significant areas were not covered in our original set of quantitative empowerment indicators and that, although most of the indicators remain relevant, the changing context in which women live requires that the specific questions used to measure these indicators be updated. We believe that the concept of women’s empowerment is still relevant in this setting; certain women stood out in terms of their aspirations, their success in developing successful economic strategies for their families, and their influence over others in their families and communities. With the exception of one ambiguous case, the mothers and mothers-in-law who had scored in the top 25% on empowerment in the 2002 survey also seemed empowered based on a qualitative assessment. Thus, the limitations that had developed over time in our original set of indicators did not appear to explain why we failed to find a cross-generational empowerment effect on the timing of marriage and childbearing.

If our sample of empowered mothers and mothers-in-law really was empowered in some meaningful way, why were they not behaving, or influencing the next generation, as we might have expected them to? It does appear that the transmission of empowerment is often thwarted, but this is mainly in relation to the marriage of daughters and sons rather than before and after marriage. Prior to their marriage, most of the empowered mothers invested in their daughters' education and some made considerable personal sacrifices to do so. Most of these mothers had had little or no formal schooling themselves. Their interest in educating their daughters reflected an awareness that the world around them was changing. Their own empowerment in many cases had come at the cost of stress from demanding physical work, which was difficult to continue as they aged. Doing physical work outside the home also diminished their social status to some extent (Schuler 2007). Empowered mothers of daughters wanted them to have easier and better lives than their own, and saw education and good marriages as the route to this.

The desire to educate daughters was not unique to the empowered mothers, however. Girls' enrolment has now surpassed boys' in primary and secondary school (Schuler 2007). Thus, education of girls is fast becoming a norm, and therefore it is not surprising to find that unempowered as well as empowered mothers often actively supported the education of their daughters and that there was therefore no discernable statistical effect of senior women's empowerment on junior women's education. Recent increases in female education appear to be associated with a growing range of options for young married women, including, to some extent, an 'exit option' which did not exist a generation previously.

Our study suggests two constraints to the impact of girls' education on age at marriage. First, is the issue of how much education is enough. For a woman with little or no education, schooling through age 14-16 may seem like a substantial amount, yet age 14-16 is still young from the point of view of marriage. Second is the tremendous social pressure to marry off daughters once they have reached puberty and the perceived economic risks of waiting. Most mothers in the study wanted their daughters to be educated (which they saw as important for the daughter's future prosperity as well as her security and autonomy within marriage), recognized early marriage as a barrier to education, and believed that early marriage and childbearing was associated with significant health risks. But rather than delaying the marriage of a daughter until the age of 18 or later, a common scenario in families of empowered mothers consisted of: (1) the mother supports her daughter's education (2) her commitment to the daughter's education wavers as the family's insecurity about marrying the daughter well builds; (3) the immature girl is taken out of school and made to marry; (4) the mother regrets the early marriage and tries to help the daughter to continue her education, become empowered economically and/or delay having children. The mothers' attempts to delay childbearing were usually undermined by the mother-in-law, the son-in-law (and sometimes the daughter herself) or by poor communication.

Educational differences between husbands and their young wives made some men insecure about keeping their brides and they saw impregnation as a way to prevent them from leaving the marriage. In just as many cases none of the key players wanted to have a child so quickly but poor information and poor communication undermined them. Mothers were often afraid or reluctant to stand up to their sons and sons-in-law. They also often incorrectly assumed that young people had more detailed knowledge than their elders regarding contraception.

Thus, women who were empowered in some aspects of their lives, valued education, and knew about the disadvantages and risks of early marriage and childbearing often failed to draw upon their empowerment in the most important strategic life choices they made (or might have made) on behalf of their children—choices about education and marriage. They also frequently failed to influence their children's strategic choices regarding initiation of childbearing, although

they often tried. Mothers in particular wanted their daughters' lives to be better than their own and they invested in their education up to a point. Their most empowering influence was in the economic sphere, the area that they knew best. They were in no position to serve as role models for later marriage and childbearing having themselves married and begun childbearing at young ages. Their ideas about age at marriage and childbearing were changing but most could not bring themselves to take huge social and economic risks that could undermine their daughters' futures. They made investments in education and took some risks but in most cases they found themselves able to give their daughters mainly what they had created in their own lives: skills in economic management and income generation and the idea of independence. Their husbands and sons generally did nothing to enable these women to empower the next generation of women by delaying their marriages and childbearing, and they sometimes directly discouraged it.

This study is innovative in tracing out-married daughters and out-of-village mothers of in-married daughters. A limitation posed by the sampling criteria we used (all three members of a mother–daughter–mother-in-law triad had to be available for interview and the girl had to be married within the past five years) is that it excluded young women whose marriages may have been delayed by labour migration, a relatively recent phenomenon in these particular villages. The most common type of employment for female migrants is in the garment industry, which in Bangladesh is based primarily in the capital, Dhaka (Amin et al. 1998; Naved and Azim 2001). The second most common is probably domestic work. Arguably, the triads in which the daughter had emigrated for employment may have been those with the most empowered senior women and the junior women who married and began childbearing later.

Conclusions

With female education rapidly expanding, it is possible that new forms of empowerment are beginning to emerge which will be driven predominantly by opportunities rather than crises (Schuler 2007; Schuler et al. 2006a). Continued support for female education at the secondary level and above, and social policies to support technical training and job creation both for young men and for young women are needed to foster these new forms of empowerment and provide viable alternatives to early marriage and childbearing for women. Secondary school scholarships for young men as well as young women might help to prevent a social backlash among this important group. The Government of Bangladesh is revising its scholarship program to make the allocation of subsidies more gender equitable (World Bank 2008). Efforts to provide viable social and economic alternatives to early marriage and childbearing for young women should be strengthened and augmented by improving access to contraceptive supplies and information directly to young women rather than leaving this role to their mothers and mothers-in-law. At the same time, efforts should be made to encourage parents and parents-in-law to communicate more openly and directly with their children regarding the advantages of delaying childbearing and the means to do so.

References

- Amin S, Diamond I, Naved RT, Newby M. Transitions to adulthood of female garment-factory workers in Bangladesh. *Studies in Family Planning* 1998;29:185–200. [PubMed: 9664631]
- Bates LM, Schuler SR, Islam F. Socioeconomic factors and processes associated with domestic violence in rural Bangladesh. *International Family Planning Perspectives* 2004;30:190–199. [PubMed: 15590385]
- Bates, LM.; Maselko, J.; Schuler, SR. Women's empowerment in rural Bangladesh: Insights from longitudinal data. Presentation at the annual meetings of the Population Association of America; Philadelphia, PA. 2005.

- Bates LM, Maselko J, Schuler SR. Does women's education influence the timing of marriage and childbearing in the next generation? Evidence from rural Bangladesh. *Studies in Family Planning* 2007;38:101–12. [PubMed: 17642411]
- Batliwala S. Taking the power out of empowerment - an experiential account. *Development in Practice* 2007;17(4&5):557–565.
- Bender DE, McCann MF. The influence of maternal intergenerational education on health behaviours of women in peri-urban Bolivia. *Social Science and Medicine* 2000;50:1189–1196. [PubMed: 10728840]
- Bhuyan KC. Social mobility and family planning practices in rural Bangladesh -a case study. *The Journal of Family Welfare* 1991;37(4):46–58.
- Das Gupta M. Life course perspectives on women's autonomy and health outcomes. *Health Transition Review* 1996;(Supplement 6):213–231.
- Desai S, Alva A. Maternal education and child health: is there a strong causal relationship? *Demography* 1998;35:71–81. [PubMed: 9512911]
- Govindasamy P, Malhotra A. Women's position and family planning in Egypt. *Studies in Family Planning* 1996;27:328–340. [PubMed: 8986031]
- International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR,B). Socioeconomic status & manifestations of domestic violence against women (DVAW) in Bangladesh. Dhaka: Rushira Tabassum Naved and Safia Azim; 2001.
- International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP). Gender and demographic change: What do we know?. Liege: Karen O. Mason; 1995.
- Jeffery, P.; Jeffery, R.; Lyon, A. Labour pains and labour power: Women and childbearing in India. New Jersey: Zed Books Ltd; 1989.
- Kabeer N. Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: A Critical Analysis of the Third Millennium Development Goal. *Gender and Development* 2005;13(1)
- Kabeer N. Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change* 2001;30:435–464.
- Kadir MM, Fikre FF, Khan A, Sajan F. Do mothers-in-law matter? Family dynamics and fertility decision-making in urban squatter settlements of Karachi, Pakistan. *Journal of Biosocial Science* 2003;35:545–558. [PubMed: 14621251]
- Maitra P. Effect of socioeconomic characteristics on age at marriage and total fertility in Nepal. *Journal of Health Population and Nutrition* 2004;22:84–96.
- Malhotra, A.; Schuler, SR. Conceptualizing and measuring women's empowerment as a variable in international development in Narayan. In: Deepa, Narayan, editor. *Measuring Empowerment*. Washington, DC: World Bank; 2005.
- NIPOORT, Mitra and Associates and ORC Macro. Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey 1999-2000. Dhaka, Bangladesh and Calverton, Maryland: Demographic and Health Survey; 2001.
- Schuler, SR. Rural Bangladesh: Sound policies, evolving gender norms and family strategies. In: Lewis, M.; Lockheed, K., editors. *Exclusion, Gender and Education: Case Studies from the Developing World*. Washington DC: Center for Global Development; 2007.
- Schuler SR, Rottach EA, Islam F. Women's empowerment revisited: A case study from rural Bangladesh. *Development in Practice* 2010;20(7):840–854.
- Schuler SR, Islam F, Rottach E, Bates LM. Why does women's empowerment in one generation not lead to later marriage and childbearing in the next: Qualitative findings from Bangladesh. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*. in press.
- Schuler SR, Bates LM, Islam F, Islam K Md. The timing of marriage and childbearing among rural families in Bangladesh: Choosing between competing risks *Social Science & Medicine* 2006;62:2826–2837.
- Schuler SR, Islam F, Boender C, Islam K Md, Bates LM. Health and development policies and the emerging "smart woman in rural Bangladesh: local perceptions. WID Working Paper Series 2006 May;286
- Schuler, SR.; Bates, LM.; Islam, F.; Islam, K., Md; Maselko, J.; Mailman, N. Married youth and their mothers: do empowered mothers foster gender-equitable relationships and better reproductive health among young people in rural Bangladesh?. Washington, DC: Academy for Educational Development; 2004.

World Bank. The Bangladesh primary education stipend project: a descriptive analysis. Washington DC: 2003.

World Bank. Whispers to voices: Gender and social transformation in Bangladesh. Bangladesh Development Series, Paper No 22; Washington DC: 2008.

Principal Sampling Strategy

Figure 1.

Principal Sampling Strategy

Note: Circles represent females and triangles males; horizontal lines represent sibling relationships, vertical lines parent-child relationships, and equal signs marriage relationships. The darkened circles represent the Ms and MILs who are the reference points for choosing the triads.

Table 1

In-depth interviews with triads of women (20 triads)

	Sample
Mothers	20
Empowered	14
Unempowered	6
Mothers-in-law	19
Empowered	11
Unempowered	8
Husbands of senior women	9
Married daughters/daughters-in-law	20
Husbands of junior women	6

Table 2

Mothers' Influence on Daughters Before Marriage

	Empowered n = 14	Not Empowered n = 6
Promoted Schooling	12	6
Married daughter before age 18	13	4

Table 3

Senior Women's Influence on Junior Women, Post-marriage

	Senior Woman Promoted:			
	Schooling	Economic empowerment	Other forms of empowerment	Delayed childbearing
<u>Mothers</u>				
Empowered (n=14)	3	13	1	6
Not empowered (n=6)	1	--	1	2
<u>Mothers-in-law</u>				
Empowered (n=11)	--	3	--	4
Not empowered (n=8)	2	1	--	3