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Gender and Family Support for Older Adults in Bangladesh

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Abstract

We examine the nature of economic and social support from children and siblings for a sample of individuals age 50 and above collected in Matlab, Bangladesh. We consider coresidence, exchanges of money, goods or services, childcare, and social visits, and examine whether the gender of the support recipient and the support provider conditions the patterns of exchanges. One half to two thirds of older adults live with a married child or receive assistance from a non-coresident child. Siblings are less likely to provide assistance and, on average, give lower amounts than children. Sons are considerably more likely than daughters to live with or adjacent to parents, or provide economic aid. But daughters are not uninvolved in exchanges with parents, and channel resources to mothers more than fathers. There is no evidence that older women are at a disadvantage in terms of coresidence, receipt of support from children or siblings, or frequent contact with children compared to men. But they are less likely to seek contact with the larger community. Older persons who do not live with children have regular contact with and receive assistance from them. Of the few who are childless, most live with family members or live alone but receive regular visits from children or relatives. We also compare the findings from Bangladesh with other East and Southeast Asian contexts.

Key words: Living Arrangements, Intergenerational Exchanges, Bangladesh, Gender

Introduction

The fertility declines that have contributed to population aging in East and Southeast Asia are expected to lead to accelerated rates of aging within South Central Asian countries such as India and Bangladesh within the next half century (United Nations 1994). Yet our understanding of the role of the family, which is the predominant source of economic and social support for older individuals in this region, is sparse. Several factors including the absence of formal mechanisms of support for the old, lower socioeconomic status compared to the rest of Asia, and an impending increase in the share and numbers of the elderly suggest an important need to address this gap in research (Martin 1990). Though the proportion of the population age 60 and above in South Central Asia is currently lower or at par with other parts of Asia, this age group is projected to increase to 19 percent of the total population by 2050 (United Nations Population Division 2003). Given the relatively large populations of countries such as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, this will translate into a larger absolute number of older individuals than in any other part of Asia excluding Eastern Asia owing to China (United Nations 1994).

In recent policy documents, the negative consequences of aging such as poverty, social isolation, poor health status, and lack of adequate economic support from the family are assumed to be more relevant for women than men (e.g. Kinsella and Velkoff, 2001; United Nations 1992, 1995). This is partly due to the greater time spent in widowhood by women and their disadvantaged position in terms of schooling and labor force participation in adulthood (Beales 2000; Kinsella and Velkoff, 2001; Mason 1992; Pratt 1997; United Nations 1992). But others argue that women may have important advantages relative to men such as being better integrated into family and community networks, greater resilience to the social and economic disruptions caused by widowhood, or more influence over children (e.g. Beales 2000; Cain, Khanam and Nahar 1979; Gibson 1996; Lopata 2002; Mason 1992). Recent studies investigate whether gender relates to the economic well-being of older persons, as well as the patterns of family exchanges between elderly and their children in East and Southeast Asia (e.g. Friedman et al 2003; Knodel and Ofstedal 2003; Lee, Parish, and Willis 1994; Ofstedal, Knodel and Chayovan 1999; Ofstedal, Reidy and Knodel, 2004; Sobieszczyk, Knodel and Chayovan 2003). These studies show that the direction of gender differences in receipt of support, economic status, or subjective measure of well-being is both context and indicator specific and displays no consistent pattern of female disadvantage. A parallel examination of whether gender correlates with the well-being or support systems for older adults in South Asian contexts is generally absent, even though gender disparities in education or participation in remunerative work in adulthood are greater than in East and Southeast Asia (World Bank 1995).

In this paper, we use data on a sample of 3,417 older adult¹ in Bangladesh to pursue three main research aims. First, we describe the nature of exchanges of money, goods, and services, space and time between older adults and their children and siblings. Second, we elucidate whether and how the gender of the older recipient and child or sibling relates to the nature of support systems for older persons. Third, we compare the findings from Bangladesh with those from other nations in East and Southeast Asia. The data is from a survey of individuals age 50 and older conducted in 1996 in Matlab, Bangladesh, an area that is fairly representative of the rest of Bangladesh and other rural populations in South Asia (Rahman, Foster and Menken 1992).

Background and Context

Bangladesh has experienced a notable decline in fertility between the early 1970's and the late 1990's. The total fertility rate has fallen from an estimated 6.1 in 1970 to 3.9 in 1995, and is projected to reach replacement by 2030 (United Nations 2003). A legacy of high population growth rates is that the nation

ranks seventh worldwide in terms of population size (Population Reference Bureau 2003). The proportion of individuals above age 60 is currently 5 percent and is projected to grow to 15 percent by mid century; the aggregate number of older individuals will increase from 6.8 million to 42.2 million in this period (United Nations 2003). Bangladesh is mostly rural, 73 percent of individuals above age 50 have no education, and 87 percent of the adult population is Muslim (NIPORT 2001). A life expectancy at birth of 58 years and low per capita income levels places the nation in the bottom tier within Asia and other nearby countries such as India and Sri Lanka (United Nations 2003; World Development Report 2004).

As articulated by Mason (1992), the main type of family system found in South Asia is patrilineal, where the household is organized around male blood lines. This structure contributes to coresidence with married sons and a heavier reliance on sons for economic support since daughters are a transitory presence in the natal household. The bilateral family arrangements in South East Asia or Southern Asia differ in that household organization centers around the nuclear family and there are closer ties between daughters and parents. This is consistent with an equal preference for coresidence with sons or daughters or a preference for the latter (Knodel and Ofstedal 2002; Mason 1992). In Bangladesh, wider gender inequalities are thought to reinforce patrilineal descent and lead to exclusion of women from inheriting property and the predominance of men in remunerative work in the labor market (Cain, Khanam and Nahar 1979; Mason 1992). The lower presumed economic well-being of women compared to men is thought to place women in particular jeopardy after widowhood (Cain, Khanam and Nahar 1979; Cain 1986; Ellickson 1988). Women, particularly widows, who are without living sons or who live alone are argued to be at particular risk of economic destitution, social isolation, poor health, and death (Beales 2000; Cain 1986; 1991; Ellickson 1988). Ellickson (1988) argues that elderly men have more social contacts and mobility in the community, more time to spend with grandchildren, and considerably lower housework burdens than women. Restrictions on the presence of women in the public sphere in this Muslim society may contribute to limiting women's social and economic roles in adulthood and old age (Cain, Khanam and Nahar 1979; Ellickson 1988; Mandelbaum 1988).

There has been little, if any, systematic inquiry about gender differences in receipt of support from children, or the social ties of older adults in Bangladesh and neighboring South Asian nations. Case studies from Bangladesh and South India suggest that a majority of those less than age 60 expect to live with or receive aid from a son (e.g. Cain 1986; Dharmalingam 1994; Vlassoff and Vlassoff 1980). Older individuals are found to be reluctant to live with or rely on daughters because sons are seen as the ideal source of support in old age and essential for taking over household management (Cain 1986; Vlassoff 1990). Though less involved than sons, some evidence suggests that daughters are actively involved in providing economic aid and physical care for their elderly mothers (Dharmalingam 1994). Several studies report that at least a majority of elderly respondents engage in housework, visit neighbors and report positive ties with grandchildren (e.g. Dharmalingam 1994; Talat and Rehman 2003). These studies are limited to single sites, relatively small samples, and either examine men or women only or do not show results separately by gender.

The most detailed studies on the well-being of older persons in South Asia to date involve correlating living arrangements and kin availability with mortality and health using prospective data from a demographic surveillance system in Matlab, Bangladesh (e.g. Rahman 1999a; 1999b; 2000; Rahman, Foster and Menken 1992). Living sons are shown to be beneficial for the survival of both elderly men and women, while having surviving brothers is negatively associated with mortality among older women (Rahman 1999a). Coresidence with a son is positively related to survival chances for women and not for men (Rahman 1999b; 2000). Mortality risks are higher for widows who live alone or with family members other than sons compared to those living with sons or heading households containing sons (Rahman, Foster and Menken 1992).² The mechanisms for these findings are thought to be the importance of sons and brothers for provision of economic support in the form of remittances, social networks, and time with grandchildren for older women. These results indicate a need for study of the availability and nature of family support systems as a starting point for improving understanding of the situation of older individuals in this context.

Data and Methods

The data source is the Matlab Health and Socioeconomic Survey conducted in Matlab, Bangladesh in 1996 (Rahman et al 2001). The central advantage of the research design is that within each household, virtually all individuals above age 50 and their spouse were selected as respondents. We consider 3,417 adults age 50 and above found within 2,687 bari (or family compounds). All analyses are weighted to account for the household and individual probabilities of selection. By including those ages 50 to 59, we depart from the conventional age cut off of age 60 or 65 used in many other studies. Given the lower life expectancies and recency of aging within the South Asian context, omission of the age group 50 to 59 in Bangladesh is less defensible than for other parts of Asia. Exclusion of the group age 50 to 59 would lead to a sizable loss of available observations since about half of the sample age 50 and above is within this age range (see Table 1).

The method consists of computing various descriptive measures of three main dimensions of support. We stratify our analyses by the gender of older adults and their children or siblings when possible. Since gender is highly confounded with exposure to widowhood (see Table 1) and many studies on older adults in South Asia highlight the vulnerable situation of widows, we also consider results by whether individuals are married. First, we consider the patterns of living arrangements and coresidence with children and other relatives. We follow convention by using data on the relationship of individuals in the household roster to the household head to infer the presence of children of each gender, married or single, as well as other relatives within a dwelling. To attain a better understanding of the presence of children who make economic contributions to the household, the analysis restricts attention to unmarried children who are adults, defined here as those ages 18 and above (Knodel and Ofstedal 2002). Since living with sons or daughters is shared by a couple, we do not consider the results for married individuals by gender.

The second main dimension of support is the resource flows between non-coresident children, siblings and older adults. In the survey, adults indicate whether they received money, goods or services from non-coresident children or siblings in the past year. The estimated amounts of support that non coresident children or sibling provide to older individuals, on average, are also considered. We examine an analogous set of items where older adults report whether they provide money, goods, or services to non-coresident children or siblings in the past year. In addition, we consider the involvement of older adults in providing childcare for grandchildren, and performing housework in the form of a series of tasks (e.g. cooking, cleaning, and animal husbandry) on a regular basis.

In lieu of coresidence, studies from East and Southeast Asia indicates that substantial proportions of elderly individuals either have a child who lives nearby or visits regularly (e.g. Knodel et al 2000; Ofstedal, Knodel and Chayovan 1999). The third dimension of family support we explore is the extent and frequency of contact between older adults and children as well as siblings in the year before the survey. We also consider older adults' reports of whether they actively visit or receive visits from other family members not including children and siblings. To gain a crude understanding of the status and connections of individuals within their community, we report whether they leave their immediate bari on a regular basis and whether others in the community solicit their views on important matters.

The subset of older adults who are not coresiding with a child, are childless, or live alone are of interest in a context where the family bears most of the burden of caring for older persons relative to the state sector. The plight of those who reside alone or are childless, particularly for women, is also emphasized within the anthropological literature from Bangladesh (e.g. Cain 1986; Ellickson 1988). We examine the availability of relatives for coresidence, provision of economic support, and social contacts as outlined above for the sub sample of individuals who do not live with children. We consider this group separately by whether they are childless or have living children since the availability of non-coresident children is likely to have implications for resources available to older persons.

Since a main aim of the paper is to conduct comparisons between Bangladesh and other East and Southeast Asian countries, we follow the practice of conditioning analyses on the availability of the child or sibling of each subtype as done in several existing studies (e.g. Knodel and Ofstedal, 2002; Ofstedal, Knodel and Chayovan 1999). For example, the percentage of older adults living with a married son is shown for those who have a married son. Since we use the age range 50 and above while studies from Asia generally consider adults age 60 or 65 and above, this may complicate comparisons. We may understate the means for the interdependencies of older adults on children that generally increase with age (i.e. coresidence, coresidence with married sons, receipt of transfers and visits from children, and providing childcare for grandchildren). But we likely overstate the percentages of older persons who live with single adult children or daughters, since the rates of doing so decline with age.

Table 1 shows means for some background characteristics of the Matlab sample. Levels of schooling and literacy are quite low. Literacy, employment rates, and schooling are markedly lower among women than men, though almost half of women report working in the past month before the survey. Almost all men are married while 38 percent of women are widowed. Rates of widowhood increase markedly with age and about 82 percent of women age 70 or higher are widowed compared to 13 percent for men (not shown). Most respondents are either married or widowed at the time of the survey, since divorce, separation or never marrying are rare events in this sample. The age distribution of women is younger than for men with a greater proportion in the 50 to 59 range. The average number of living children is 5.

Table 1. Select Characteristics of Individuals Age 50+ by Gender and Age, Matlab 1996 (means)

	Men	Women	Total
Any reading ability	42.6	12.2	27.5
Currently Working	80.4	46.4	63.5
Years of Education	2.8	0.6	1.7
Married	95.2	61.4	78.4
Widowed	4.0	38.0	20.9
<i>Age Distribution</i>			
50 to 59	43.5	56.0	49.7
60 to 69	37.7	31.7	34.7
70+	18.6	12.3	15.5
Has a living child	98.7	98.2	98.5
Number of living children	5.1	4.9	5.0
Sample Size (unweighted)	1730	1687	3417
Sample Size (weighted)	1726	1679	3405

Results

Patterns of Living Arrangements

Table 2 shows various possible living arrangement options for older adults in the sample. A large percentage of individuals age 50 and above (82 percent) coreside with a child. Owing to the greater propensity for widowhood among women, living with a spouse or child is more common among men than

women. Accordingly, there is little difference in the propensity to live with a spouse or child once the results are conditioned on marital status. Unmarried men and women are more likely than their married counterparts to live without a child, but are more likely to have a married child live with them. The age difference between spouses is, on average, about 10 years. At any given age, married men are more likely to have a child in the household than married women because of the recency of childbearing experience of their younger spouses. Exclusive coresidence with family members other than a spouse or child is concentrated among the 12 percent of men and women who are not married. Living alone is rare among all groups save unmarried women, where 12 percent live in a single person household.³

Table 2. Pattern of Living Arrangements of Older Adults by Gender and Marital Status (conditioned on availability), Matlab 1996

<i>% who live with:</i>	Men	Women	Marr Men	Marr Women	Unmarr Men	Unmarr Women	Total
A child	86.4	77.9	86.9	79.7	76.0	75.0	82.2
A spouse or child	98.4	89.0	99.5	97.7	76.0	75.0	93.7
An adult child	72.2	73.3	72.2	73.2	70.4	73.5	72.7
A married child	36.8	49.8	35.6	42.9	61.5	61.1	43.3
With a relative only ¹	0.9	5.4	0.3	(1.0)	(12.3)	12.6	3.2
A spouse only	11.9	11.1	12.5	18.0	na	na	11.5
Alone	0.6	5.3	.05	(1.1)	(11.6)	12.3	2.9

1 excluding spouse or child

n.a. not applicable

() cell entry based on 35 cases or less.

In Table 3, we show levels of coresidence with children by the gender and marital status of the child and older respondent. As expected, older adults in this context are markedly more likely to live with a son than a daughter. Specifically, ratios for living with a son relative to a daughter range from 1.5 to 3.6. The ratio of coresidence for married sons relative to daughters ranges from 6.8 to 9.6, while the ratios for single children are near unity. These patterns resemble those found in Taiwan and the Northern Uplands of Vietnam, where coresidence ratios for married sons relative to married daughters range from 8 to 10 (Friedman et al 2003; Ofstedal, Knodel and Chayovan 1999). In these contexts, the marked differences in the percentage of older persons living with sons compared to daughters were also observed for married but not single adult children. The prevalence of living with married sons is higher among the unmarried than all older persons, while living with married daughters is generally low irrespective of gender or marital status. For the unmarried, there are no significant gender differences in coresidence with children of various types.ⁱⁱ

The bottom portion of Table 3 reports the levels of coresidence with a child for older adults who have 1) only married sons 2) only married daughters and 3) those whose children are all married. This measure has been used in other studies (Knodel and Ofstedal, 2002; Ofstedal, Knodel and Chayovan, 1999) to assess the flexibility of the elderly with respect to the gender of the married child they live with. If there is no gender preference in coresidence, the levels of coresidence should not differ much between these three groups. Since the subgroup of respondents with children of the same gender are more likely to have smaller

Table 3. Living Arrangements of Older Adults by Gender and Marital Status (conditioned on availability of each child subtype), Matlab 1996

<i>% who live with</i>	Men	Women	Unmarr Men	Unmarr Women	Test for Gender Difference (unmarried)	Test for Gender Difference (all)
A son	83.2	75.7	73.7	75.5	ns	*
A daughter	56.4	34.3	(28.9)	20.9	ns	*
A married son	52.7	57.3	65.2	66.9	ns	+
A married daughter	5.5	6.0	(9.6)	6.9	ns	ns
Unmarried (adult) son	73.8	73.0	(54.5)	64.8	ns	ns
Unmarried (adult) daughter	79.1	67.8	(45.0)	50.4	ns	*
<i>Coresidence Ratios:</i>						
Son/Daughter	1.5	2.2	2.6	3.6		
Son/Daughter (married)	9.6	9.6	6.8	9.6		
Son/Daughter (single adult)	0.9	1.1	1.2	1.3		
<i>Coresidence for those with:</i>						
	%	N (unweighted)				
Only married sons	69.8	155				
Only married daughters	35.9	74				
Only married children	62.1	951				
Standardized ^a	64.7	951				

^a Standardized on the distribution of married children for families with only married children, all of whom are of the same sex.

~p<.10 +p<.05 *p<.01

n.s. not significant at 10 percent level.

() cell entry based on 35 cases or less.

family sizes than those whose children are all married, this may over or understate the (unstandardized) percentage for coresidence with a married child. The bias is downward (upward) if the association between coresidence and the number of children is negative (positive). For the group whose children are all married, we thus standardize the proportion living with a child by the distribution of the number of children for those whose married children are of the same gender. The standardized percentage, in this sample, increases slightly because of an irregular association between coresidence and family size.

The percentage of those who live with a child for those who have married sons only (70 percent) is slightly higher than the standardized percentage for those with only married children (65 percent). But the coresidence levels are markedly lower when older persons have only married daughters (36 percent). This indicates a strong reference for sons in terms of coresidence similar to that found in Taiwan, where coresidence with a child is about 34 percent lower for respondents with only married daughters compared to those with only married sons or married children. Gender preference is relatively more skewed in favor of daughters in the Philippines and Thailand, where the proportion of older individuals who live with a child is higher when they exclusively have married daughters compared to married sons or married children (Knodel and Ofstedal 2002).

Inter and Intra Generational Exchanges

In Table 4, we show the patterns of resources provided to older adults by non-coresident children and siblings. Anywhere from 39 percent to half of the older adults receive money, goods or services from a non-coresident child. Similar to coresidence, the greater tendency for sons to support parents compared to daughters is most evident among married children. Older persons are 2.6 to 5.2 times more likely to receive aid from a son; for single adult children the ratios are lower and range from 1.6 to 2.6. The amount of aid that older individuals receive from a son, on average, is also considerably larger than what they receive from a daughter. Unmarried women are significantly more likely to receive support from a married son than unmarried men (52 percent of women compared to 31 percent of men). They are also significantly more likely to receive help from a son or daughter than men. Irrespective of marital status, older women are more likely to receive assistance from married daughters than men, and this gender difference is significant among the married group of respondents. While 17 percent of married women report receiving support from a married daughter, this is about 8 percent for married men. As a result, the ratios of receiving support from sons relative to daughters are half as large for married women than married men.

Table 4. Support Received by Older Adults from Non-Coresident Kin (conditioned on availability of kin of each subtype), Matlab 1996

<i>% received money, goods or services from:</i>	Marr Men	Marr Women	Test for Gender Difference (married)	Unmarr Men	Unmarr Women	Test for Gender Difference (unmarried)
Any non-coresident child	39.1	44.6	+	(37.8)	49.8	ns
Son	49.6	49.7	ns	(40.1)	55.1	~
Daughter	9.5	18.8	*	(11.1)	21.3	~
Married Son	45.5	46.1	ns	(31.1)	51.7	+
Married Daughter	8.1	17.2	*	(11.4)	18.0	ns
Unmarried adult son	45.5	40.5	ns	(44.8)	49.1	ns
Unmarried adult daughter	(17.6)	(14.8)	ns	(27.7)	(26.2)	ns
<i>Mean amount received (taka):</i>						
From Son	15000	6454	*	2936	6473	ns
From Daughter	502	296	ns	258	401	ns
<i>% who receive support from a sibling</i>	3.0	8.9	*	(3.5)	10.6	*
<i>Ratio of Receipt of Support for:</i>						
Son/Daughter	5.2	2.6		3.6	2.6	
Son/Daughter (married)	5.6	2.7		2.7	2.9	
Son/Daughter (single adult)	2.6	2.7		1.6	1.9	

~p<.10 +p<.05 *p<.01 n.s. not significant at 10 percent level.

() cell entry based on 35 cases or less.

Men are less likely to receive aid from a son if they are unmarried compared to being married. For example, 46 percent of married men receive aid from married sons compared to 31 percent of unmarried men. Unmarried women are slightly more likely to receive aid from sons than those who are married. As a result,

the ratios of receiving support from married sons relative to married daughters are near 2.7 for both unmarried men and women. Women, both married or unmarried, are significantly more likely to receive assistance from a sibling than men. About 11 percent of unmarried women receive aid from a sibling compared to 3 percent for unmarried men. Siblings of older adults are less involved in providing resources to them compared to children.

Compared to the fraction who receives support, relatively few older adults provide material or monetary support to children (Table 5). About 17 and 14 percent of married men and women respectively provide help to children who do not live with them. This level is lower than for the Philippines (58 percent) but similar to that observed in Taiwan or Vietnam (Agree et al 1998; Knodel et al 2000). Women are more likely to provide childcare than men though gender differences are not significant. The percentage of older persons caring for grandchildren irrespective of frequency in Matlab (90 percent, not shown in Table 5) is higher than levels reported for the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand and Taiwan where among individuals age 60 plus, 23 to 49 percent care for grandchildren (Biddlecom, Chayovan and Ofstedal 2002; Knodel et al 2000). Singapore is more similar to Bangladesh in that 70 percent of persons above age 60 are involved in caring for grandchildren. Older women are significantly more likely than men to do housework on a regular basis. Unmarried men are much less likely than married men to assist with housework or childcare. These marital status patterns are also found for women, though they are less pronounced.

Table 5. Support Provided by Older Adults to Children (conditioned on availability), Matlab 1996

<i>% providing support in the form of:</i>	Marr Men	Marr Women	Test for Gender Difference (married)	Unmarr Men	Unmarr Women	Test for Gender Difference (unmarried)
Money, goods, services	16.8	14.4	n.s.	(12.8)	7.8	n.s.
Regularly care for grandchildren ^a	49.8	54.4	n.s.	37.9	50.8	n.s.
Regularly perform household chores	31.5	63.4	*	18.2	40.1	*

a for those with a grandchild residing in same bari.

~p<.10 +p<.05 *p<.01 n.s. not significant at 10 percent level.

() cell entry based on 35 cases or less

Contact with Children, Siblings, and Larger Community

About two-thirds or more of older respondents report seeing a non-coresident child on at least a monthly basis (Table 6). Older married women are significantly more likely to live adjacent to or see a son daily compared to married men. Such frequent contact with sons is higher for unmarried men and women compared to those who are married. The ratios of frequent contact with sons relative to daughters among the unmarried are about three to four times higher than those found in Philippines, Taiwan and Thailand (Ofstedal, Knodel and Chayovan 1999). There are no significant gender differences in contact with children of any frequency among those who are unmarried. Though respondents are over twice as likely to have frequent interaction with a son compared to a daughter, most older persons receive visits from daughters on at least a monthly basis. The greater involvement of daughters in providing monthly visits relative to sons produces ratios of monthly contact below one. The ratio of more frequent contact with sons relative to daughters is generally similar to the ratios for their involvement in providing money, good or services to parents. One explanation for the greater interaction of parents with sons is their closer proximity, which is

consistent with the patrilocal nature of this society. Sons are more likely to reside in the same bari or village as parents than daughters, and are more likely to visit their parents at least weekly even after conditioning on location with respect to parents (results not shown).

Table 6. Interaction with Non-Coresident Children (conditioned on availability of child of each type), Matlab 1996

% of older adults	Marr Men	Marr Women	Test for Gender Difference (married)	Unmarr Men	Unmarr Women	Test for Gender Difference (unmarried)
<i>Contact with Sons:</i>						
Live next door to or see daily	29.5	35.6	*	56.1	45.8	ns
See monthly or more	60.4	64.1	ns	68.9	65.5	ns
<i>Contact with Daughters</i>						
Live next door to or see daily	13.4	16.8	ns	15.3	16.1	ns
See monthly or more	80.7	73.2	*	71.1	70.7	ns
<i>Ratio of Contact</i>						
Sons/Daughters (daily)	2.2	2.2		3.6	2.8	
Sons/Daughters (monthly or more)	0.7	0.8		.9	0.9	

~p<.10 +p<.05 *p<.01

n.s. not significant at 10 percent level.

() cell entry based on 35 cases or less

Table 7 shows the patterns for contact between older adults and their siblings. The findings indicate a high frequency of interaction between older men and their brothers. About 73 percent of unmarried men and 80 percent of married men live near or see a brother daily. Most men see their brothers on at least a monthly basis. In contrast, only about 8 percent of older married or unmarried women live near or see a brother daily and 43 to 46 percent see a brother on a monthly basis or more. While men are less likely to see their sisters daily or live near them compared to brothers, they more likely than older women to have contact of any frequency with sisters. These differences are significant depending on the gender of the respondent in all cases save frequent contact with sisters among the unmarried. Ratios of daily contact with brothers compared to sisters are appreciably greater than unity for men. For women, rates of contact that are similarly lower than men with either brothers or sisters produce ratios close to one.

There are important gender differences in respondents' propensity to seek contact with relatives or the community outside their immediate bari among both married and unmarried older adults. Older men are significantly more likely than older women to visit a relative who resides outside their main compound on a weekly basis or more, though 40 to 45 percent of elderly women also engage in such visits. The largest gender difference is found for leaving the bari at least weekly, which is over twice as common among men than women. There is no significant gender difference in the propensity to receive visits from relatives from outside the compound. Men are more likely than women to report being consulted by others in the community on important matters. When compared to those who are married, unmarried respondents are somewhat less

likely to receive visits from relatives for both men and women. Among women, they are also less likely to have others in the community consult them for their opinions. But the percentage of men or women who leave the bari at least weekly is virtually identical for those who are married relative to the unmarried.

Table 7. Interaction with Non-Coresident Siblings (conditioned on availability), Relatives and Local Community, Matlab 1996

<i>% of older adults:</i>	Marr Men	Marr Women	Test for Gender Difference (married)	Unmarr Men	Unmarr Women	Test for Gender Difference (unmarried)
<i>Contact with Brothers</i>						
Live next door to or see daily	79.8	7.5	*	72.6	8.2	*
See monthly or more	92.3	46.5	*	86.9	42.9	*
<i>Contact with Sisters</i>						
Live next door to or see daily	12.1	4.5	*	8.6	6.1	ns
See monthly or more	69.3	41.4	*	63.7	35.7	*
<i>Ratio of Contact</i>						
Brothers/Sisters (daily)	6.6	1.6		8.4	1.3	
Brothers/Sisters (monthly or more)	1.3	1.1		1.3	1.2	
<i>For all older adults:</i>						
% who leave <i>bari</i> to visit a relative ^a at least weekly	64.0	44.3	*	57.3	39.5	*
% who have a relative from outside <i>bari</i> visit at least weekly	58.7	54.6	n.s.	49.8	47.7	n.s.
% who leave <i>bari</i> at least weekly (for any reason)	89.9	42.3	*	88.8	42.4	*
% individuals in community seek opinion on important issues	61.2	50.1	*	56.7	43.1	~

~p<.10 +p<.05 *p<.01 n.s. not significant at 10 percent level.

() cell entry based on 35 cases or less

^a not including children or siblings.

Social and Economic Support for Non-Coresident Older Adults

Older persons who either do not live with a child or are childless may be particularly disadvantaged in terms of availability of economic support and high levels of social isolation (Hermalin, Ofstedal and Mehta 2002). As shown in Table 2, 18 percent of older persons in the sample do not live with a child. A small percentage of the sample (1.5 percent) does not have a living child. This percentage rises to 8 percent for those not living with a child (not shown). In Table 8, we examine the economic support from children or siblings and social contacts of non-coresident older persons with a living child and those who are childless.

We adopt a strategy used by Knodel et al (2000), and show the living arrangement patterns of these two groups using a series of mutually exclusive hierarchical categories. A category that is placed higher in the listing in Table 8 is presumed to be preferred over a lower one. For instance, living with a spouse or a child is ordered higher than living with siblings or more distant relatives, or to living alone.

Table 8. Patterns of Living Arrangements and Support Receipt for Non-Coresident Older Adults, Matlab 1996

<i>% distribution</i> <i>(mutually exclusive hierarchical categories)</i>	With living children		Childless	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Child lives in same compound or village	55.7	53.5	na	na
Lives with spouse	41.4	25.2	57.7	23.1
Lives with a relative ^a	2.9	12.3	26.9	57.7
Lives with a non-related individual	0	0	0	0
Lives alone and sees child weekly/daily	0	1.2	na	na
Lives alone and sees relative weekly/daily	0	5.1	7.7	7.7
Lives alone and sees child/relative monthly	0	2.1	3.8	0
Otherwise lives alone	0	0.6	4.0	11.5
Total	100	100	100	100
N (unweighted)	212	337	26	26
Receive support from child	60.0	68.3	na	na
Receive support from sibling	1.2	6.2	27.2	17.7
Mean amount received from child or sibling (taka)	10025.8	4914.3	272.3	574.6

n.a. not applicable.

^a not including spouse or children.

Among the subset of non-coresident older persons with a living child, nearly 55 percent have a child living in the same bari or village. The remaining percentage who live with a spouse is lower for women than for men (25 compared to 41 percent) due to the greater propensity for widowhood among women. As a consequence, women are more likely than men to live with a relative excluding their spouse or child. As in Vietnam, coresidence with non-family members is not found in the sample (Knodel et al 2000). About 9 percent of women live alone, while none of the men are found to do so. Most of the women who live alone receive regular visits from a relative or child. Women are more likely than men to receive support from a non-coresident child, though the average amounts they receive are less than half of those received by men. Compared to all older persons, the percentage of those who do not live a child but receive help from a non-coresident child is about 50 percent higher (see Table 4). Siblings are a relatively unimportant source of aid for older persons who have children but do not live with them.

For the small proportion of childless older persons, men are twice as likely to live with a spouse as women. Most women in this group, if not living with their husband, live with relatives. Compared to those who do not live with a child but have living children, a higher proportion (15 and 19 percent of men and women) live alone. About 4 and 12 percent of childless men and women respectively live alone and do not

receive regular visits from a relative, but given the small number of base respondents ($N = 26$ for men or women), they represent a negligible portion of the sample. Siblings become a relatively important source of economic aid for the childless elderly than for those with living children. But when compared to non-coresident older persons with a living child, the propensity to receive aid from a sibling is much lower than that from a child. The average amounts received are also considerably lower than those provided by children to their parents.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this paper, we provide a broad overview of the family support system of older adults in Bangladesh, and compare the findings with those from other parts of Asia. Of particular interest is to assess whether the gender of the support recipient and support provider conditions the patterns of exchanges involving older adults. Taken together, our results suggest that the family support system in Bangladesh is very much intact. Intergenerational coresidence is very high, with 82 percent of older parents living with one or more child. Between one half of married and two-thirds of unmarried older adults live with a married son. Since married children often have children of their own, living with married children typically implies a three(+)-generation household. Up to half of older adults also receive money, goods or other services from family members outside the household. Most elderly parents who do not live with children have a child who either lives nearby or receive monetary or other assistance from a non-coresident child. Very few older persons are childless; the living arrangements of childless elders typically include residing with a spouse or relatives and thus appear to reflect a functioning family support system. Most individuals who live alone are in frequent (weekly or daily) contact with their children or other relatives. The percentage of those who live alone and lack regular contact with kin in Bangladesh is lower than Vietnam where 8 percent for those with children and 33 percent of childless elderly in Ho Chi Minh City and nearby areas are found to lack such contact (Knodel et al 2000). Though siblings provide some support in the form of resources or social contact particularly when the older adult is childless, the level and amount of support is small relative to that from children.

The support patterns shown in this paper reflect the patrilineal family system in Bangladesh, which stresses the importance of sons in caring for and providing assistance to parents in old age. In this respect, the findings for coresidence and intergenerational exchange most closely resemble those found in other patrilineal societies such as Taiwan and North Vietnam. The greater involvement of sons is most evident with respect to coresidence, where married sons are considerably more likely than married daughters to coreside with parents. Sons are more likely to coreside or live within a close distance, provide money, goods or services, and be in frequent contact with their parents than is true for daughters. Older adults with only married daughters are also considerably less likely to live with them compared to those with only married sons or married children. But daughters are actively involved in exchanges with their parents, particularly their mothers. Nearly one fifth of women, married or unmarried, receive money, goods or services from a non-coresident married daughter. Between 70 and 80 percent of older adults have at least monthly contact with a daughter. And older individuals in Bangladesh and in Taiwan display some flexibility in preferences regarding the gender of a coresident child since nearly one third of those with only married daughters choose to live with them (Ofstedal, Knodel and Chayovan 1999).

Relative to settings such as the Philippines or Thailand, older adults in Bangladesh are about a half to two-thirds as likely to receive monetary or material aid from non-coresident children (Ofstedal, Knodel and Chayovan 1999). They are no more (or less likely) to provide assistance to non coresident children in the form of money, goods or services. They are considerably more likely to provide assistance to children in the form of childcare than elderly in Taiwan, Philippines, Thailand or Vietnam. There is no consistent evidence that women are at a disadvantage when it comes to receiving support from children or siblings. Among those who are not married, there is no significant gender differences in the tendency to live with a child, and

irrespective of marital status, there are generally no important gender differences in contact with children. Among the unmarried, women are more likely to receive assistance from married sons, and the average sums they receive from sons are also nearly three times those received by unmarried men. Older women are also more likely to receive aid from a non-coresident sibling than men irrespective of marital status; among those who are childless, women receive twice as much, on average, from siblings than do men.

Women are more involved in provision of aid in the form of childcare and housework within the household than men. To the extent that childcare integrates an older person into the family and provides more familial contact, the greater involvement of older women in this task is a potential benefit to them. As suggested by Ellickson (1988), one area in which women are at a disadvantage compared to men is social interaction with individuals other than children or grandchildren. Older women are substantially less likely than men to leave the bari on a regular basis to visit relatives. They are also less likely than men to be in contact with their siblings, and enjoy lower status in the community as proxied by their lower participation in giving community members advice on important issues. But there is no difference in the percentage of older men and women who receive frequent visits from relatives.

Bangladesh is still at a relatively early stage with respect to population aging and socioeconomic development. A continued decline in fertility raises the long run specter of childlessness and not having living sons. As elsewhere in Asia, there is concern that as the proportion of older people grows and family size declines, the family support system will be in jeopardy. Results from other Asian settings that are further along in this transition suggest that this concern may not be warranted. Levels of coresidence remain very high and a large proportion of older adults receive monetary, material and social support from children. In Vietnam and Thailand, these patterns seem impervious to family size—those with one or two children are as likely (or nearly as likely) as those with larger families to receive these types of support (Knodel et al 2000; Knodel, Saengtienchai, and Obiero 1995). Our findings indicate that the perceived vulnerability of women in old age when it comes to intergenerational exchange in Bangladesh requires qualification. Future research will be useful to elucidate gender differences in income, assets, and economic status, along with the interrelationships between receiving family support, economic status, and health outcomes.

Notes

1. We use the term “older adult” or “older persons” instead of “elderly” to distinguish our younger sample of individuals age 50 plus from the conventionally use group of those age 60 or 65 plus in the literature.
 2. In India, Sengupta and Agree (2003) report that mobility difficulties among a sample of individuals age 60 and above is negatively related to having a living son. The selection of healthier individuals into having surviving sons, and measurement error in the self reported mobility measure complicate interpretation of this result.
 3. Though 12.3 percent of unmarried men also live alone, this percentage reflects a small number of cases (N =5) compared to women (N = 64).
- ii. The small number of cases for unmarried men likely contributes to wider confidence intervals for the computer gender differences even when there are sizable differences in means.

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