

Change and persistence in rural Bangladeshi women's roles

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Bangladesh has experienced a rapid decline of the total fertility rate (TFR) since the independence of the country (1971) and almost achieved population replacement in 2017 (Figure 1). This presentation seeks to examine how rural Bangladeshi women's roles have changed along with the decline of TRF. It focuses on participation in education, productive and reproductive work and life course choices with paying attention not only to difference between men and women but also to difference within women particularly in the respect of social class. The presenter has conducted fieldwork in villages in the Southern part of Tangail district, located about 80 km northwest of Dhaka and since 2007. The survey method is unstructured interview and participate observation.

Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country (more than 90 percent of the population is Muslims) but basically patriarchal society irrespective of religion and ethnicity. In case of Muslims, all sons inherits equally and all daughters also have share in inheritance. But they usually transfer their inheritance right to their brothers or the other paternal relatives. Nowadays we can see the increase of love marriage but arranged marriage is dominant and considered legitimate. The bride is usually taken into the groom's family. The nuclear family is commonly observed today because extreme impoverishment in rural area until the middle of the 1980s had caused the breakdown of joint family system.

As a whole, social and economic environment surrounding women has drastically changed since the late 1980s in Bangladesh. The enrollment ratio had rapidly increased in the middle of the 1990s (Figure 2). Female enrollment ratio was improved by the government's policy; it has provided scholarship all female students in the secondary school since 1993. This policy aims not only to spread girls education but also to reduce fertility. One of the conditions for receiving scholarship is not to marry until passing the exam of SSC (Secondary School Certificate).

The idea that men earn outside and women do housework is still common although female spatial and social mobility has increased. Women who had to maintain herself and her family used to have no way without being domestic servants, agricultural labors or beggars once. Garment sector has become one of most important industries in Bangladesh particularly since the end of 1990s. About 60% of employees in garment factory has been female since then. However, desirable work for higher educated women has been still very limited and not available without connection and ability to pay high amount of bribe. The quality gap in education has also caused a sharp difference between social classes in female labor force participation. Under such a situation, female educational qualification is generally considered to a kind of social status to marry a high status husband, rather than a means of support.

Thus, female roles have been diversified like becoming students or breadwinners as garment factory workers. But their roles as wives and mothers have never changed. For most women, marriage is the only available and accepted option in their lives in the respect of social norms as well as practical problems for survival. It is hard to live alone for a woman without her husband, even she is a victim of domestic violence, because of economic and social pressure. Only upper class women in urban area may be able to choose single life. There is a huge gap between upper class women with prestige and the others, the vast proportion of women.

The tendency of son preference as well as social pressure to women who have no child is also extremely high. Infertility is regarded as abnormal and the fault of women even husband is sterile. Some demographers who emphasize female education's contribution to the fertility decline tend to

plainly consider that higher educated women can make a decision on reproduction more autonomously. However, it is very challenging to change the social norm of gazing women as ‘the childbearing sex’. It does not become easier for women to oppose the social norm, just because they receive higher education. We guess that the tendency that women marry and bear one or two children will not easily change in rural Bangladesh.

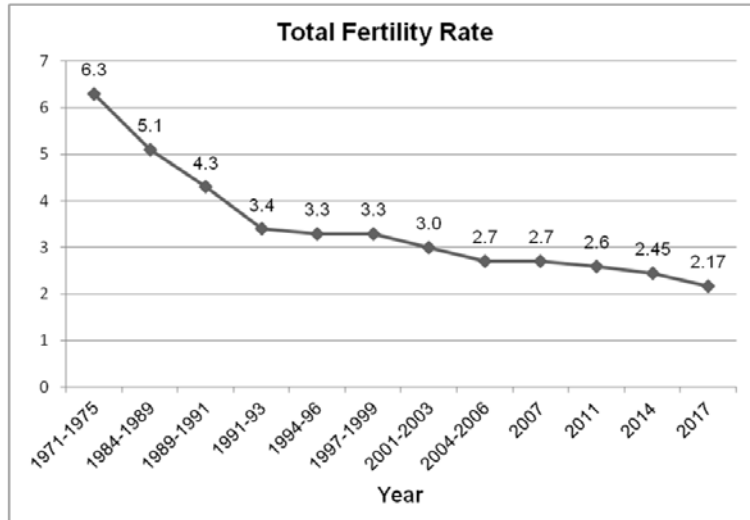


Figure 1 Total fertility rate in Bangladesh, 1971-2017

Notes) Each datum of 1971-1975 and 1994-1988 is by 1975 Bangladesh Fertility Survey (BFS) and 1989 BFS. The datum of 1989-1991 is by 1991 Contraceptive Prevalence Survey (CPS). Each datum of 1991-93, 1994-96, 1997-1999, 2001-2003 and 2004-2006 is by 1993-1994 Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS), 1996-1997 BDHS, 1999-2000 BDHS, 2004 BDHS, and 2007 BDHS. See the source for more details.

Source) National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT), Mitra and Associates, and Macro International. 2009. *Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey 2007*. Dhaka, Bangladesh and Calverton, Maryland, USA: National Institute of Population Research and Training, Mitra and Associates, and Macro International, p. 50. [https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR207/FR207\[April-10-2009\].pdf](https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR207/FR207[April-10-2009].pdf), CIA World Factbook. <https://www.indexmundi.com/g/g.aspx?v=31&c=bg&l=en>

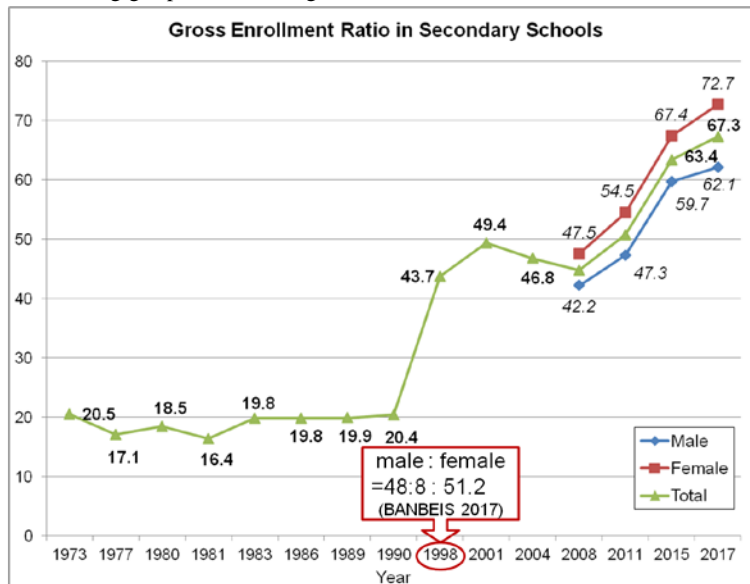


Figure 2 Gross enrolment ratio in secondary schools, 1973-2017

Notes: Each datum from 1973 to 2004 is by the World Bank. Each datum from 2008-2017 is by Source: The World Bank, Education Statistics. <https://datacatalog.worldbank.org/dataset/education-statistics> UNESCO, Date for the sustainable development goals. <http://uis.unesco.org/country/BD#slideoutmenu> BANBEIS 2017. *Bangladesh Education Statistics 2017*. Dhaka: BANBEIS. <http://data.banbeis.gov.bd/>