

# Exploring Fatherhood in Bangladesh

Fatherhood is an important element  
in the construction of  
Bangladeshi male identity.

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**B**oth fatherhood (the social and symbolic status accorded to fathers) and fathering (the activities fathers engage in and carry out in the care of their children) have largely been formally conceptualized through a Western lens. Theories, research, and program models focused on fathers' contributions to children's well-being have drawn upon traditional Euro-western cultural values, family formations, and goals for children's development. For several reasons, these perspectives are unlikely to be useful in understanding fatherhood and fathering in Bangladesh or other South Asian contexts.

Bangladesh is one of the poorest and most densely populated countries in the world (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2000). By most measures, it can be said that about half of Bangladeshi households live in poverty; development has been slow and uneven in Bangladesh. As cultural and religious values and norms are paramount, many families, especially those in rural areas, live much as they have for generations. Extended families and village-level household groupings are a means of survival in a country that has been politically unstable, lacks a social security system, and is repeatedly overwhelmed by natural disasters.

More than 75% of the population lives in rural areas. The nation's agrarian economy accommodates a large rural labor force; however, the contribution of agriculture to the GDP has been decreasing in recent years, due to natural disasters, urbanization, and an increase in transnational labor migration (Asian Development Bank, 2004). These factors are producing social change, including an increase in the number of families isolated from their extended kin. Additionally, the war of liberation from Pakistan, from which Bangladesh emerged as a sovereign nation in 1971, resulted in fatherlessness for a significant propor-

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tion of youngsters growing up in a context of terror and social chaos. Since the 1960s, urbanization has increased at an annual rate of 6% (Asian Development Bank, 1995). This trend, along with the pressures of both poverty and new economic opportunities, is reshaping some aspects of family life. Families tend to be smaller in cities and the nuclear family group is becoming more common. The authors observe that traditional parenting roles are changing as well, often including more involvement of fathers in direct care of children. There is, however, scant research on the country's changing demographic, social, and environmental contexts with respect to their implications for fathers' abilities to fulfill their roles.

This article seeks to initiate dialogue about fathering and fatherhood in Bangladesh within the contexts of cultural continuities and shifts, labor migration, and geopolitical disturbances that are affecting families and communities throughout South Asia. Increasingly, fathers are being recognized as an important resource for children and families as they respond to emerging educational and economic opportunities and cope with the challenges associated with climate change and sociopolitical upheavals. These circumstances offer a rich opportunity for research to understand fatherhood and fathering in Bangladesh and to anticipate how fatherhood is likely to change, given the highly gendered roles of mothers and fathers, the Islamic and Bengali values underlying those roles, and the persistence of various forms of joint, extended, and village-level family groupings (Chowdhury, 1995).

The authors draw from discussions they have had with leaders in early childhood and family health programs in Bangladesh and from their own direct observations. The second author is a pediatric specialist who has seen more than 60,000 fathers over the course of 15 years of clinical practice with urban, rural, and periurban Bangladeshi families in a variety of settings, including hospitals, private practice, and benevolent organizations. With no systematic observational or self-report data to draw from, there is a risk of promoting an essentialized and oversimplistic view of Bangladeshi fathers, and the authors emphasize this article's impressionistic, general quality. Its purpose is to provide some preliminary observations to generate questions and hypotheses for future research that others may undertake as fatherhood in Bangladesh and other South Asian contexts becomes more recognized as a focus for policy and programmatic support.

### **Family Life and Fathering Roles in Bangladesh**

While clear differences exist among different populations of Bangladeshis (especially between urban and rural; low and high income; Muslim, Hindu, and

Buddhist; and different ethnic groups), some general features may be said to characterize family life. Strong family ties are the foundation of community life, and family allegiance and mutual dependency overrule individuals' needs and goals (Chowdhury, 1995). Elders, especially males, play a dominant role in family life. Children are highly valued by both men and women. Monogamy is the norm, and a man's wife and children are considered his property. Most women are economically dependent on men and social life is highly gender-differentiated. While most Bangladeshis practice a moderate form of Islam, *purdah* (the Bengali word for "curtain"), or the tradition of keeping women secluded, is a powerful cultural ideal (Kabeer, 1988; Siddiqi, 1991; White, 1992). While the practice rigidly restricts women's participation in public life, Evans (1995) notes that it can create a positive outcome for children insofar as fathers have to be involved in their children's lives in any activities outside the home.

Fatherhood is an important element in the construction of Bangladeshi male identity. While mothers are children's primary caregivers, fathers make the major decisions concerning children's health care, education, and social life. Despite a traditional image of fathers as distant authority figures and breadwinners, the authors observe that many fathers are involved with their children in a wide range of situations and provide for a variety of children's needs, particularly in rural settings. It is important not to overlook or downplay the hands-on care that many fathers provide on a daily basis, especially when they work with their children by their side or in close proximity, as is often the situation in rural areas.

During a child's infancy and early childhood, a responsible father is considered one who provides financially for the child's basic needs and enforces obedience to rules. Observations indicate that fathers of very young children tend to focus on whether and when a child has achieved developmental milestones, such as smiling, crawling, walking, and talking. Once children attend school, many fathers are engaged in their educational activities (e.g., helping with homework). In general, fathers provide opportunities for children to explore and master skills outside the home. In particular, as sons become older and either enter school or participate in their fathers' work, fathers tend to become more actively engaged, spending time with their sons—conversing, teaching skills related to work and/or food production, and playing games. Fathers who have only daughters may prepare them in much the same way they would their sons, since these daughters are the only family torchbearers.

Health practitioners and early childhood development specialists in Bangladesh have described impor-

tant rural versus urban differences in fathers' roles. In general, rural fathers appear to spend much more time with their children, especially boys; fathers and sons work together in the fields and factories, bathe together in ponds, and gather firewood and food together. Fathers also may walk their children to and from school. Urban fathers generally have much less time to spend with children as a result of long work and commuting hours. It is generally thought that the rural fathers tend to follow a time-worn path in their approach to raising children. In contrast, urban fathers, especially those who are more educated and socioeconomically secure, may be more egalitarian.

### Patterns of Father Care

Although it is common to hear that Bangladesh is relatively homogeneous, significant diversity exists, including a small but highly diverse population of indigenous peoples, the portion of the population (11%) that is not Muslim, a small number of extremely wealthy families, a rapidly growing number of urban families with one or both parents in the workforce, as well as families living in the countryside much as they did during or before British rule. Normative assumptions and cultural stereotypes about "the Bangladeshi father" will hinder understandings of the distinctive needs and goals of different populations of fathers and families, and prevent them from receiving the kinds of support they may find most helpful to ensure optimal family and child outcomes. With a view to understanding this diversity, several different fathering patterns are described below.

**Family Fathering.** Many children in Bangladesh grow up in extended family households and neighborhood groups where it is common for grandfathers, uncles, and, in some cases, servants to act as male role models, particularly when the father goes out to work. In addition to providing basic care and support, these men often spend time with the children, playing with them and passing on knowledge and skills in their respective areas of interest or capability.

**Isolated Fathering.** Increasingly, it is necessary for parents to live apart from their extended family to be near jobs. In these families, particularly when both parents work outside the home, there is a growing need for fathers to be more directly involved in the care of their children. Changes in the traditional view of fathers and their role have been observed by the authors, not only among more educated families and in more privileged socioeconomic groups, but also among those working in such lower paying jobs as in the garment industry, in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and in government class III and IV jobs.

Surrogate fathering sometimes is necessary when a

father is deceased or has migrated away from home for work; a male relative or neighbor often assumes the father's role. Only 10.6% of the country's households are headed by females (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2006). However, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2008), the number of men who outmigrate for work and then remarry, thus leaving their families behind in their home villages, is a growing problem. The ramifications of this trend for child well-being extend beyond loss of family income and emotional stability. For example, because women are excluded from many areas of social life, such as going to the market, a child's world shrinks when the father is absent. For example, children who face a health emergency after dark may not be taken to hospital, because an unaccompanied woman cannot be away from the house at night.

**Sibling Fathering.** Child-to-child care is extremely common in Bangladesh. When both parents work, elder siblings, including boys, are frequently assigned the role of supervising younger children and meeting their needs for food, clothing, and interaction. This is a pattern of care that requires research examining its effects and programmatic support.

**Lone Fathering.** Increasing numbers of mothers are entering the garment industry or migrating to the Middle East and Malaysia as temporary labor migrants, leaving children in the care of the father and extended family. In addition, the mortality rate among women is higher than among men, and fathers may be left to care for children whose mothers have died. It has been observed that Bangladeshi fathers who are single parents tend to focus equally on nurturing and guiding their male and female children.

### Supporting Positive Father Involvement: Content and Approach

Introducing programs to support fathers' involvement in optimizing conditions for young children is an idea that is gaining ground in international social development. However, a mainstream Western lens tends to view the parent-child relationship in individualistic terms. It follows that programs to support positive father-child involvement often focus on developing fathers' personal skills, especially their communication skills, to enhance their relationships with their children (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998). Such approaches are less likely to be appropriate in situations where extended kin share responsibility for children's care and where fathers' roles have yet to be understood and documented. Despite this limitation, one can see that fathers' involvement is important to strengthen the capacity of families and villages to secure children's survival, health, and optimal development in Bangladesh.

Fathers, as the child's connection between home and the outside world, must understand children's needs if they are to take appropriate actions to support their children's development. Thus, a parent education program in Bangladesh should focus on providing fathers with appropriate information about child health, safety, nutrition, and development, and encourage them to share ideas about how they can enhance and sustain their caregiving roles, even across changing circumstances, such as temporary out-migration. Some efforts have already begun but require support and more focused input from the education and health sectors, and from teachers, early childhood programs, and health practitioners.

**Education.** Education is a promising entry point for mobilizing fathers' interests. In some programs in Bangladesh, men are involved in their children's early education through community-level committees. During field work, the authors have repeatedly heard village women emphasize the importance of ensuring men's participation on these committees, because men make the final decisions about children's education. Committee involvement also enhances fathers' understanding of how they can be involved in helping their children with homework, walking them to and from school, teaching them about the world beyond the home, and boosting their self-concept as capable learners. In addition, the strategy of actively involving fathers in their children's schools by drawing on their experiences and utilizing their expertise on various topics in curriculum is a promising approach.

**Efforts To Increase Child Safety.** Engaging fathers in programmatic efforts to increase child safety is another potential entry point. Drowning (in ditches, monsoon drains, canals, ponds, wells, and paddy fields) is a major cause of child fatalities in Bangladesh. Prevention involves efforts to cover over or cordon off these water hazards, as well as to ensure supervision when children are near water (Rahman, Shafinaz, Linnan, & Rahman, 2008). These steps require the involvement of male family members, who must make the decision to undertake these measures and carry them out. Harnessing the influence of fathers and other male relatives to invest in child survival, health, and development would be ideal.

**Focus on Elder Children.** Because of the prevalence of child-to-child care, programs to provide basic guidance to elder children would be useful. Bangladesh has an outstanding track record of effective outreach and service to displaced and poor people through its groundbreaking NGO known as BRAC, which uses such innovative methods as peer-to-peer teaching, including with youth at the village level. This model could be extended to educational activities for youth caregivers, focusing on child safety, health, nutrition,

and development.

**Considerations.** Caution must be taken in planning such programs. Efforts to increase fathers' involvement with their children may be rejected because they threaten parents' traditional roles or because they are perceived as foreign. Also, there is a constant risk of losing cultural heterogeneity around the globe as a result of hegemonic Euro-western values about gender equality, good parenting styles, and optimal family life. International organizations, such as UNICEF and Save the Children, tend to propagate specific parenting models based on Euro-western ideals and research.

In the case of Bangladesh, cultural ideals with respect to parenting are highly divergent from Western ideals. A relativist perspective that focuses on adapting parenting models to specific local circumstances and maintaining respect for cultural and religious edicts will be more meaningful. It is critical to recognize that in Bangladesh, mothers are children's primary caregivers, because both Bengali culture and Islam promulgate sharply delineated gender roles.

Efforts at outreach and support also call for some particularly creative innovations, in that many fathers are unable to read and few rural families have access to print material, DVD players, or computers. Village-level community support groups and BRAC's successful peer-teaching principle of "each one teach one" appear to hold the most promise.

## Implications for Future Research

Research is needed to characterize the complexities of fathering in Bangladesh. A first priority for research is to examine family roles, relationships, and experiences of fatherhood from the perspectives of fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, and extended family members (such as grandparents). The goal would be to identify points of divergence and convergence across family members' experiences as well as across families. Becker's (2008) study of South Asian Muslim families in Britain is one prototype for a similar study focused on families in Bangladesh. Given the expectation of diversity, it would be important to collect demographic information and separately sample families in rural and urban settings, with high and low income, within different ethnic groups, living in extended or isolated family units, with and without migrant labor experiences of the parents, and so on.

A key research question is to find out which populations of Bangladeshi fathers are indicating the most need for increased support for their involvement with their children. Other questions that could guide future investigations are suggested below.

**Cultural Values.** What cultural and social barriers, challenges, and opportunities are experienced by

Bangladeshi fathers? What is the experience of fathers who do not conform to dominant cultural customs and social norms? A socially inclusive vision for father involvement initiatives must include the perspectives, goals, and activities of individuals and communities outside the mainstream (Long, 2007).

**Changing Roles.** How do fathers, particularly urban fathers whose wives also work outside the home, reconcile their changing role with the traditional image of the Bangladeshi father and their male identity?

**Intergenerational Disruption of Fatherhood.** What are the effects of the 1971 war of liberation on the roles of fathers today, especially since a large proportion of youngsters grew up without fathers and grandfathers?

**Child-to-Child Care.** How does caring for younger relatives affect a boy's readiness to become a husband and father? It is important to assess how this experience may prepare children for adult responsibilities, especially as formal schooling becomes more available and child-to-child care decreases. The impact of sibling care from the perspective of the younger child's well-being is also a topic for inquiry.

**Transnational Labor Migration.** When economic opportunities draw fathers or mothers away from the family, how does this affect gender relations and family roles with respect to child care? Dannecker (2005) argues that Bangladesh can be viewed as a case study of the extent to which global and regional migration movements transform gender relations—an aspect of migration that has been neglected by mainstream literature and policymakers worldwide.

## Conclusion

In the contexts of the poverty, labor migration, urbanization, and geopolitical issues discussed in this article, fathers are increasingly recognized as an important resource for children and families. Euro-western understandings of fatherhood and fathering have limited applicability in these contexts. Research on culturally guided roles and the sociopolitical conditioning of fathers' involvement with their young children will ideally set the stage for developing a larger program of internationally networked research, both to understand fatherhood and fathering in South Asian contexts and to question and expand Euro-western ideals. Understanding fatherhood in Bangladesh and exploring ways to encourage fathers' positive involvement will yield insights about how to support the achievement of internationally defined development goals and local, culturally defined goals for children and families in the region.

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