NEVER THE TWAIN SHALL MEET: AGING MEN AND WOMEN IN BANGLADESH

ABSTRACT. The story of aging in Bangladesh may be quite different, depending on whether one is a woman or a man. There are rewards for the woman if she manages to become the head of the domestic realm of an extended family, but even this is brief, as she loses that role when her husband dies. The old man, however, does not relinquish his authority nor hand over the economic reins until his own death. Male and female roles cannot be said to converge in old age, let alone cross over, as described for a number of societies. Only in their roles as grandparents do males and females share similar behaviors.

Key Words: aging, gender roles, Bangladesh, grandparenthood.

“Heaven lies under the feet of one's parents.” So states the Quranic injunction to obey, honor and eventually care for parents in Islamic society. In Bangladesh the father continues to be obeyed until his death, and honored even beyond that time. That is, the old man usually does not relinquish his position as head of the household as long as he draws breath. In some cases, the old father may need to be propped up and the words spoken are those of his oldest son, but at least the pretense is maintained that the father heads the household. He is cared for in his old age, but his infirmities, whatever they may be, do not automatically cancel his authority.

The mother, on the other hand, is honored and cared for, but obeyed only by the younger children and eventually perhaps her daughters-in-law — often that is short-lived. Her words count for much only for a brief time in her life. The Quran on the subject of parenthood does not differentiate between male parent and female parent, but in Bangladesh the woman, even in old age, remains subdued, withdrawn at least from the public realm and, sometimes, even forgotten.

Old people in village society in general are respected. This was also the finding of a social psychological study done on village life in the 1960s (Zaidi 1970: 105—115). In the course of Zaidi’s study a questionnaire was administered which presented a list of values to which the respondents were asked to reply: important, neutral or not important. Of the values suggested by the questionnaire, the one which was thought most important was “respect for old people both in the family and in the community.” In descending order the next five were “respect for one’s parents, financial support for one’s parents in old age, respect for the religious man, respect of the wife for her husband, and respect for the head of the family.” Though an anthropologist might have chosen to elicit values in a somewhat different manner, it is only with the first, the reported highest value,
that an observer might question whether reality coincides with the norm. The old and poor outside the family seem to receive their treatment based on their poverty rather than their old age, that is, they don't receive very much consideration. The general tone of Zaidi's results, however, emphasizing respect for authority in general and care for old parents in particular, seems to reflect a fairly accurate picture of the Bangladeshi village.

Studies have been done in a number of societies, including other Muslim societies, which describe a role cross over for men and women as they age. Gutmann (1977: 302—323) has developed a psychologically based model suggesting that after a man's family has matured he can put aside the aggression he made use of in supporting and defending them and indulge the more feminine side of his nature. The old man is said to become more passive and even sensual, concentrating on his own bodily pleasures. He gradually retires from the public realm to the domestic realm. This is typified by the old man sitting in the sun, occasionally napping, smoking and eating snacks. For the woman, this model describes someone who is initially submerged in the nurturance of others as she tends her growing family. After that task is accomplished, she can become more egocentric and aggressive, moving outside the domestic realm and seeking out other adults for conversation and stimulation. As she never has before, she expresses her opinion in public and may even take part in public decision making. For the woman, this increased freedom is considered to be partially related to her menopausal removal from a reproductively active role. In general, men are said to become more passive and domestic and women more aggressive and active in the public realm. In addition to Gutmann's (1974: 232—244) study of the Druze, other works on Mediterranean and Islamic societies have also used the model (Brown, 1982; Cool and McCabe, 1983; Goody, 1976; Keith, 1985). In many societies, one can find at least passing reference to increased freedom for women as they age.

Aging men and women in Bangladesh do not seem to follow these role changes. Old men retain their authority and remain heads of their households. Although they can occasionally be found sunning themselves, men of all ages enjoy more leisure time than women. The only sphere where men's feminine nature may be said to emerge is perhaps in their relations with grandchildren as will be described later. If old women move into the public realm in Bangladesh, it is not their age which puts them there, but their poverty. Reports tell us that more and more women, young and old, are being forced into the public realm to support themselves and their families.

Purdah confines most of the Muslim women of Bangladesh who can afford it, especially rural women, to the domestic realm for all but the earliest years of their lives. Even as children, however, little girls seldom venture far from their homes and from the women of their families. It