

# Men's Perceptions of Women's Participation in Development Initiatives in Rural Bangladesh

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## Abstract

Without taking masculine issues into account, women's participation in development initiatives does not always guarantee their empowerment, health, and welfare in a male-dominated society. This study aimed to explore men's perceptions of women's participation in development (WPD) in rural Bangladesh. In adopting a qualitative approach, the study examined 48 purposively selected married and unmarried men aged 20–76 years in three northwest villages. Data collection was accomplished through four focus group discussions (FGDs) with 43 men clustered into four groups and through individual interviews with five other men. A qualitative content analysis of the data revealed an overall theme of “*feeling challenged by fears and hopes*,” indicating variations in men's views on women's participation in development initiatives as represented by three main categories: (a) fearing the loss of male authority, (b) recognizing women's roles in enhancing family welfare, and (c) valuing women's independence. In the context of dominant patriarchal traditions in Bangladesh, these findings provide new insight into dynamics and variations of men's views, suggesting a need to better engage men during different stages of women-focused development initiatives.

## Keywords

gender, men's perceptions, women in development, rural Bangladesh

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Female participation in socioeconomic development initiatives has been considered crucial not only for fueling economic growth but also for enhancing gender equality in many low and lower-middle income countries. It is generally believed that women's participation in development (WPD) is likely to promote female independence, health, and welfare (Kumari, 2011; Yang, 2012). WPD has also become a controversial issue connected to women's vulnerabilities to higher workloads, marital conflict, and domestic violence. A few studies have reported that WPD can improve women's income and health (Dineen & Le, 2015; Hamad & Fernald, 2015; Kabir & Huo, 2011; Madhania, Tompkinsa, Jacka, & Fishera, 2015; Nahar, Banu, & Nasreen, 2011), whereas other studies reported that WPD may increase their workloads, family conflicts and exposure to domestic violence (Angelucci, 2008; Ashraf Ali, 2014; Enloe, 2015; Hippert, 2011; Karim, Emmelin, Resurreccion, & Wamala, 2012; Sigalla & Carney, 2012).

By exclusively focusing on women, socioeconomic development initiatives may create a social environment

wherein women are able to increase their personal income and independence. Without taking masculine issues into account, women's participation in development initiatives may not always guarantee their empowerment, health, and welfare in a male-dominated society. Although most socioeconomic development initiatives predominantly emphasize the income and primary health-care needs of women, a few studies have identified that

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married men play important roles in shaping WPD, as they can hinder (or encourage) their wives' income-earning activities (Karim & Law, 2013; Vonderlack-Navarro, 2010). Indeed, the adverse gendered implications of these development initiatives may be related to how men view WPD. The present study explored men's perceptions of WPD in rural Bangladesh.

## Gender Inequality and Female-Focused Development in Rural Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a lower-middle income country situated in South Asia where roughly 31.5% of people live below the national poverty line—earning less than two US Dollars a day (Asian Development Bank (ADB), 2017; World Bank, 2011). The majority of Bangladeshis (nearly 66%) live in rural areas (World Bank, 2015). People living in rural areas often lack access to services like education, health care, electricity, clean water, and adequate infrastructure, while urban residents enjoy a relatively better standard of living. On the other hand, 35.2% of rural residents live under the poverty line compared to 21.3% of city dwellers (World Bank, 2011, 2015). Thus, poverty levels are severe in rural areas, particularly among women. Bangladesh is a patriarchal society in which women are deprived of many human rights. Gender inequality is widespread in Bangladesh. It ranks at 142 (of 188 countries) in the Gender Development Index (GDI) and Gender Inequality Index (GII) (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2015). Gender inequality in Bangladesh is characterized by limited female access to economic resources, male guardianship and control over women's life choices, male control over social institutions, the confinement of women to household tasks and to the private sphere, lack of female access to higher education and employment, and a very high prevalence of violence against women (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics [BBS] & Statistics and Informative Division [SID], 2013; García-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2005; Huda, 2006; National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT), Mitra and Associates, & ICF International, 2016; Schuler, Bates, & Islam, 2008). Gender inequality is relatively more severe in rural Bangladesh than in urban Bangladesh. For example, only 29% of rural women are allowed to determine how they use their own earnings (compared to 39% of urban women) (National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT) et al., 2016). Furthermore, 32% of rural women are restricted from leaving their homes compared to 26% of urban women, and almost 30% of rural women justify wife beating compared to 25% of urban women (National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT) et al., 2016). Therefore, women

have become the main target group of socioeconomic development initiatives in rural Bangladesh (Ahmed, Petzold, Kabir, & Tomson, 2006; Hadi, 2005). WPD is not only considered an element of poverty reduction but also a means of empowering women in ways that enhance their skills, capabilities, decision-making capacities, social status, health and wellness (Hadi, 2001; Schuler, Hashemi, Riley, & Akhter, 1996).

Numerous governmental organizations (GOs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are involved in socioeconomic development in rural Bangladesh. Such organizations emphasize agricultural development (modern farming, irrigation, and the initiation of cooperatives), social development (nonformal education, skills training, and microcredit support for off-farm employment creation), and health promotion (family planning, primary health care, water supply and sanitation). Although these development projects may involve both men and women, the main target group of most development initiatives in rural Bangladesh is women. Previous studies identified that 51.1% of rural married women have participated in development initiatives and that 97% of development initiative credit recipients have been women (Karim & Law, 2013; World Bank 1998). A study also reported that 81% of all loans given to these women are controlled by their husbands (Karim & Law, 2013). Previous studies further speculate that female participation in development initiatives may be limited by patriarchal gender norms in rural Bangladesh, by a lack of woman-friendly market facilities, by a view where all women are seen as necessarily to be entrepreneurs, and by a lack of transformative policies on gender (Karim, Emmelin, Lindberg, & Wamala, 2016; Karim & Law, 2013).

## Masculinity and Men in Women's Development Participation

Masculinity issues are increasingly considered to be central to programs on gender equality (Mel, Peiris, & Gomez, 2013). According to Michael Kimmel (2000), masculinity refers to the social roles, behaviors, and meanings recommended for men in a given society. Masculinity refers to the socially constructed positioning of men in a gendered order (Connell, 2005). Bangladeshi masculinity is traditionally attributed to the "dominant male model" whereby men are expected to serve as family guardians by fulfilling household providing roles (Haque & Kusakabe, 2005; Islam & Karim, 2011–2012; Yount, Miedema, Martin, Crandall, & Naved, 2016). This traditional form of masculinity constitutes an important dimension of widespread gender inequality that is causing married women's education, occupations, incomes, sexuality and reproduction to be controlled by their husbands (Schuler et al., 1996; Yount et al., 2016). Women

are generally considered to be dependent members of households (Kabeer, 1990). The husband is likely to be the guardian of his wife while the wife is expected to obey her husband. A previous study reported that roughly 82% of married Bangladeshi men sustain very traditional gender ideologies holding that men should fulfill their family obligations through the completion of bread-winning activities while women must fulfill their duties through homemaking and caretaking (Karim & Law, 2013). Studies also indicate that married women's participation in development is likely to be affected by their husbands' interferences (Karim & Law, 2013; Schuler, Hashemi, & Badal, 1998).

WPD can have some positive outcomes, such as women's increased participation in socioeconomic activities, which can in turn improve their status, independence, and health-seeking behaviors (Ahmed et al., 2006; Dineen & Le, 2015; Hadi, 2001, 2005; Hamad & Fernald, 2015; Kabir & Huo, 2011; Madhania et al., 2015; Nahar et al., 2011; Strobach & Zaumseil, 2007). An exclusive focus on WPD can, however, also create confusion and contradictions among men. As most people expect men to maintain standard worldviews of masculinity, many men may appraise masculine gender role stress that comes from failing to uphold socially labeled masculinity standards ("dominant male provider"), leading to an increased risk of male marital violence against women and to unfavorable conditions for women (Angelucci, 2008; Ashraf Ali, 2014; Eisler, Skidmore, & Ward, 1988; Enloe, 2015; Hippert, 2011; Sigalla & Carney, 2012). Masculinity norms can indeed vary for each man depending on his personality. It can be discursively manipulated from the "standard" view of masculinity of a society, creating an individual sense/pattern of masculinity (Pascoe, 2003). Without bringing these masculinity issues into the discourse of gender equality and women's welfare, it is quite difficult to understand how WPD initiatives work in a patriarchal social context. In recent years, scholars and development practitioners have also discussed how men could be integrated into women-focused development and into health-care interventions in low income countries (European Commission, 2012; United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2016). There is, however, still a lack of studies on how men perceive and experience female participation in socioeconomic and health-care initiatives.

## Aim of the Study

Within the context of increasing female participation in development initiatives of dominant masculinity representations in rural Bangladesh, the present study aims to explore men's multiple views on WPD according to their age, education, occupation, and marital status.

## Theoretical Framework

This study takes into account the concepts of patriarchy and masculinity (Connell, 2002, 2005; Dobash & Dobash, 1979) and an intersectional perspective (Shields, 2008) to understand men's perceptions of WPD in rural Bangladesh. According to the propositions of patriarchy and patriarchal masculinity (Connell, 2002, 2005; Dobash & Dobash, 1979), men may dominate and abuse their wives to maintain their "standard masculinity—supremacy" as reflected in male guardianship endorsed by patriarchal norms/ideologies. As a sociocultural theory, the concept of patriarchy helps elucidate how patriarchal social order constructs a dominant masculinity that is reflected in men's views on WPD. On the other hand, the intersectional lens (Shields, 2008) focuses on how masculine identities can vary according to a man's age, marital status, parenthood, income, education, religiosity, class position, and political affiliation. In integrating the intersectional perspective with the concept of patriarchy, the present study sheds light on the theoretical discourse on how individual men's identities may discursively manipulate the "dominant standard of masculinity" in relation to female participation in development initiatives in a patriarchal social context.

## Methods

### Study Design

Through a social constructivist perspective, the present study employed a qualitative methodological approach in exploring men's perceptions of WPD. The social constructive perspective implies that reality is socially constructed and that every human action may generate social constructions of reality (Dahlgren, Emmelin, & Winkvist, 2007). As a research methodology, this perspective stresses the joint efforts of participants and researchers in constructing knowledge (Dahlgren et al., 2007). Therefore, in the present study, the social constructive perspective was considered appropriate for analyzing how different groups of men create their subjective masculinities with regard to WPD. The study is mainly based on focus group discussions (FGDs) with the aim of exploring the subjective and dynamic views of men according to age and other social identities (Lewis, 2003). FGDs allow for interaction and negotiation between participants and are suitable for studying prevailing norm systems relating to specific phenomena (Dahlgren et al., 2007). Additional individual interviews with men were held to further explore some of the issues brought up through the FGDs.

### Study Sites

Fieldwork was conducted in three purposively selected villages located in three sub-districts of northwestern

**Table 1.** Study Participant Profiles.

Group	Age in years	Marital status	Education	Occupation	Number of participants
<i>1</i>	50–60	All married	2 high school, 4 primary school, 3 illiterate	Farmers, school teachers, businessmen, local leaders	09
<i>2</i>	40–52	All married	1 college, 5 primary school, 3 illiterate	Farmers, small business owners, shopkeepers, day laborers	09
<i>3</i>	20–27	All unmarried	All—university graduate/student	Men with a college or university-level education	10
<i>4</i>	22–35	8 married, 7 unmarried	2 college, 5 high school 3 primary school, 2 illiterate	Farmers, small business owners, shopkeepers, day laborers	15
<b>Individual respondents</b>					
<i>1</i>	60 years	Married	Illiterate	Farmer—illiterate, able to sign his own name, low income	01
<i>2</i>	76 years	Married	Primary school	Retired—literate, middle income, freedom fighter	01
<i>3</i>	50 years	Married	Illiterate	Farmer—illiterate, able to sign his own name	01
<i>4</i>	62 years	Married	Illiterate	Farmer—illiterate	01
<i>5</i>	37 years	Married	High school	Shopkeeper—primary education	01
<b>Total</b>					<b>48</b>

Bangladesh. The villages are situated around 10–35 km from the Rajshahi district headquarters and are typical of northwestern Bangladesh with regard to residents' occupational, income, and religious profiles. Most residents of these villages are farmers or agricultural laborers, and most of them are Muslim.

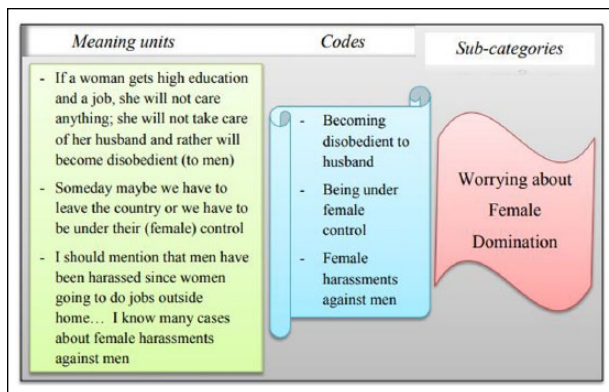
### Sampling and Study Participants

The study was conducted with 48 purposively selected married and unmarried men aged 20 to 76 years from the studied villages: 43 were included in four FGDs, while five were interviewed individually. During the selection of male interviewees, the aim was to maintain variation in terms of age, education levels, and occupations to analyze the data while taking sociodemographic characteristics into account. The selection of participants was completed in consultation with key informants (local leaders, teachers, and students) based on a few criteria: the men must be residents of the village, be unmarried or married, be at least 18 years of age, and be willing/able to express their opinions freely. Considering practical issues such as their availability, it was decided that the number of men involved in a FGD should be roughly 9–10. However, on one occasion, 5–6 more young men joined the session out of curiosity and an eagerness to participate. To ensure the spontaneous participation of the study

participants in the group discussion, the selected men were clustered into a number of groups divided by age. The remaining five men who had failed to attend the FGDs were later approached for individual interviews. The demographic and socioeconomic profiles of the study participants are presented in Table 1.

### Data Collection

The fieldwork was conducted between September 2015 and April 2016. The first author (RK) moderated all of the FGDs together with one facilitator who took notes. Three of the focus groups took place in open yards in the villages, and one was held in a room close to the university campus. These locations provided a necessary level of privacy for the discussions. Following a flexible sequence of topics, the men were asked to discuss their view, expectations, and feelings on women's participation in socioeconomic development and health-care initiatives. The men were also asked to discuss how they viewed the following: (a) women's free movement, (b) women's participation in public affairs, (c) women's workloads related to their engagement in both income-earning and home-making activities, (d) male involvement in home-making jobs, (e) women's economic independence and autonomy, and (f) women's partaking in household decision-making. The first author (RK) also conducted the individual



**Figure 1.** Analytical process of transforming text into meaning units and finally to codes and subcategories.

interviews. In these interviews, the participants were asked to elaborate on the same issues discussed in the FGDs but on issues more closely related to their personal experiences. These interviews were held in the privacy in the participants' homes. All of the discussions and interviews were held in the local Bengali language and were tape-recorded with the participants' permission. The FGDs lasted between 30 and 60 min, and the individual interviews took 20 to 40 min.

### Data Analysis

All of the audiotaped interviews were transcribed in Bengali. Key points of the text were translated into English for the research team to take part in the analysis. The first author (RK) transcribed the interviews as well as translated the key text into English, and then the second author (LL) and the last author (ME) also went through the text and data analysis (interpretation of the data). To apply an intersectional perspective (Shields, 2008), a qualitative content analysis was conducted to analyze the data (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The meaning units were analyzed to understand their core meaning. The interview texts were thoroughly read to identify text (meaning units) representing views of the interviewed men. The interview transcriptions were separated into different meaning units and were then abstracted and labeled with codes (see Figure 1). By clustering relevant codes, categories capturing the manifest meaning were developed. Finally, an overarching theme on the latent meaning of the text was identified. Figure 1 illustrates how meaning units and categories were coded by grouping relevant codes. First, the FGD data were analyzed and then the individual data were coded to identify additional meanings and to determine how they could complement the analysis. No new categories were added from the individual interviews, but they contributed to the formation of new codes and to the

fine-tuning of subcategories. Finally, the ages, education levels, marital status, and occupations of the participants were taken into account to develop a theme that could capture the underlying meaning. To ensure the credibility of the data analysis and theme development process, all meaning units, codes, and categories generated from the data were discussed through peer-debriefing sessions with the colleagues/students who facilitated the fieldwork and later with members of the research team.

### Ethical Considerations

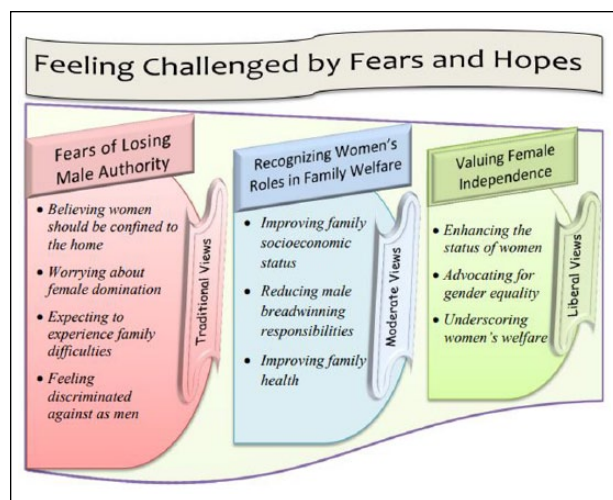
The study followed ethical research guidelines of the Bangladesh Medical Research Council (BMRC). All of the study participants were informed of the objectives and importance of the study and of the content and procedures of the interviews. Their consent was also sought prior to audio recording. They were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary. Moreover, they were assured that the study data would be kept confidential and that their identities would not be revealed in any report. The FGD participants were informed of confidentiality limits applied to the group discussion, and they were advised to not share information discussed within the group. The study design and consent procedures used were approved by the Ethics Review Committee (ERC) of BMRC (Ref. BMRC/ERC/2007-2010/889, Dated: 01 September 2008).

### Study Findings

The qualitative content analysis generated a broad theme of "*feeling challenged by fears and hopes*," revealing that there were differences among the men regarding their understanding of WPD in rural Bangladesh. The findings indicate an overall variation in men's views ranging from a fear of female domination to a pragmatic realization of how WPD could increase family income and welfare, thus inspiring hope for gender equality and justice. The above theme was maintained through three main topics derived from the content analysis: (a) fears of losing male authority, (b) recognizing women's roles in enhancing family welfare, and (c) valuing women's independence (see Figure 2). The categories and subcategories are elaborated on below, together with quotations to show how they are grounded in the data.

#### Fears of Losing Male Authority

The theme "fears of losing male authority" emerged from the FGDs and interviews conducted in the study area. Regardless of educational and occupational backgrounds, it was predominantly (but not only) older men



**Figure 2.** Themes determined from categories/subcategories denoting various male views.

(50–76 years) who expressed a fear of losing a sense of patriarchal family authority and of being controlled by women/their wives as a result of increased female incomes and community participation. This category was divided into four subcategories of men's perceptions of female participation in development initiatives as follows: (a) believing women should be confined to the home, (b) worrying about female domination, (c) expecting to experience family difficulties, and (d) feeling discriminated against as men.

**Believing women should be confined to the home.** Of the older married men interviewed, there was strong opposition toward women's free movement outside of the home. The subcategory "believing women should be confined to the home" was reflected in a number of their statements. The codes show that these men considered women who leave their homes as "shameless," and they objected to "female participation in extra-household affairs" and stressed that "women should stay at home." These men expressed firm views on a sense of shame connected to women leaving the domestic sphere and also clarified how WPD risks the transgression of certain religious norms. The following is a statement from an illiterate married man (55 years, FG1) on WPD:

*I will not allow my daughter to leave the home to work. It is not right for my daughter to leave the home to perform a job and to behave like a bad/shameless woman.*

Another married man (60 years, FG1) (a local middle class farmer with a primary school education) also argued that women should be confined to the private sphere:

*The woman's place should be confined to the home, as a woman's main duties are to take care of her husband and children... women's voices should not be heard beyond the room... It is good if they can earn an income while staying at home, but it is offensive when they go out shamelessly and roam around without wearing proper dresses... Girls are leaving their homes to do bad things... They do not even care about elderly people. They are wearing the wrong dresses and are performing shameless behaviors in public places... they do not wear Hijabs – Hijabs should not be colorful and must fully cover one's face. Seeing these dresses hurts our eyes...*

Some younger men (20–35 years) also underscored women's responsibilities to their homes. They stressed the importance of traditional work divisions and exhibited an unwillingness to participate in home-making tasks. One young unmarried man (24 years, FG3) with a university-level education stressed why women should stay at home:

*There has been a division of work from the beginning of time. Men work outside of the home while women take care of homemaking... I trust that when women stay at home while men try to increase their family income, this brings about family happiness.*

From a religious point of view, another unmarried young man (29 years, FG4) with a primary-level education objected to female participation in productive extra-household affairs as follows:

*I like the women who only work inside the home and who will not work in fields. I do not like the idea of women going out, as Islam does not permit them to work with other men.*

**Worrying about female domination.** In many of the discussions, the older men expressed their worries about female domination in relation to women's increased incomes and authority gained through WPD. This was echoed in many of the discussions, where the men argued that WPD would cause women to go out of control and to become disobedient. Out of a fear of losing marital power and of the harassment of women, these men strongly opposed the principles of gender equality as threatening traditional gender norms. Numerous codes show that these men "fear working women," as they believe that "women will go out of control," "challenge the authority of men," "will start insulting/dictating men," and so on. One married man (52 years, FG2) with a high school level of education described his fear of losing male power: "When a woman gets an education and a job, she will not care about anything; she will not take care of her husband and will become disobedient (to men)..." Another married man (57 years, FG1) said:

*The norms of western countries have arrived in our society. I can see that women are now moving everywhere (outside of home boundaries) freely. Men are actually afraid of these women, as men may have to hide themselves (from society). Maybe someday we will have to leave the country or will be under their control.*

Among the middle-aged men consulted (40–50 years), there were also reports of fears of female domination as a consequence of WPD and thus opposition to women's economic rights. A married schoolteacher (49 years, FG2) stated that “*A married woman should not need personal property or an income... as she is fully supported by (her) husband...*” Although some men accepted that female participation in development should not be a problem, an interview with a 45-year-old married man (FG2) showed that these men were still concerned with dominating behaviors from women: “*Men have not exactly been harassed as a result of women working outside of the home... it is not their jobs but their (women's) dictating behaviors that are the problem.*” On the other hand, some educated young men also described a fear of female negligence as a result of female participation in development. For example, one unmarried unemployed man (26 years, FG3) with a college degree described his fear; “*... you have to ensure that men will not be neglected by their wives who earn an independent income.*” Another young unmarried man (24 years, FG3) studying for his Bachelor's degree further elaborated on his view of how WPD can place psychological pressure on married men:

*When women do not have their own money, they have to be dependent on men, and they are also obedient to their husbands... (But) when women earn an income, they contest male authority... Male wellbeing in turn declines ... while women become more confident as a result of having an independent income, placing more psychological pressure on men...*

**Expecting to experience family difficulties.** Some of the younger and older men also believed that WPD would exacerbate family problems. They viewed WPD as a threat to patriarchal family harmony. One young unmarried man (26 years, FG3) with a university degree explained how he felt about WPD:

*When you bring the women out of the home, social bonds and family discipline break down; the number of conflicts between spouses leading to family disorganization also increases. Therefore, development initiatives should primarily target men...*

In one of the individual interviews, additional family difficulties were described as a consequence of female loan borrowing. For example, one 60-year-old married man stated “*It is impossible to repay loan installments on*

*time. In turn, loans become a family burden... Family problems like quarrels between spouses can also occur...*” Another married man (76 years old) explained how the misuse of loans can create further family problems:

*The misuse of loans is prevalent in our area. When a loan is used for a business to earn an income, this is good. However, when a loan is used for food – e.g., to purchase lavish food items, this is very bad. This (failure to repay the loan) can create family problems.*

**Feeling discriminated against as men.** Among the older men, there was a common view of female-focused development as discriminatory against men. The men made several complaints of WPD as unfair. One statement from a married school teacher (57 years, FG1) reveals his views on WPD as discriminatory against men: “*Men are not offered any jobs or loans. There are female quotas everywhere. Women are getting the opportunities while their husbands and brothers are being deprived...*”

It was also a commonly held belief among the educated young men that the employment system is discriminatory against male candidates. Interviews with one 27-year-old unmarried university graduate (FG3) revealed a masculinity crisis related to female-focused development as follows:

*If a girl is offered a job, she will never marry an unemployed man... she will get married to a more solvent man.... But if a man gets a job, he will even marry an unemployed, poor, and less educated woman. So it seems that the employment of women discriminates against men... when men get jobs, this helps reduce unemployment rates... there should not be any quota for women with jobs... rather, men should be given jobs as they maintain the family unit.*

### Recognizing Women's Roles in Enhancing Family Welfare

Some men also viewed WPD as critical for enhancing family income, health, and welfare. The category “recognizing women's roles in family welfare” mainly emerged through discussions with young men on WPD as represented in three subcategories: (a) improving family socioeconomic status, (b) reducing male breadwinning responsibilities, and (c) improving family health.

**Improving family socioeconomic status.** Among the educated young men, there were those who appreciated female involvement in development, as it can increase household incomes. One 25-year-old unmarried university graduate (FG3) said: “*Both men and women need education and employment to increase family incomes.*” The same argument was put forth by one educated unmarried man (26 years, FG3) who said “*Without female*

participation in economic activities, no family or country can become developed.” Another educated unmarried man (27 years, FG3) described how WPD can help husbands. “I support women working outside of the home as it can increase one’s family status, mainly when women’s husbands are not able to support the family...”

Also, among the young men with relatively less education, some stressed that WPD is critical for the reduction of household poverty. One married man (29 years, FG4) with a high school education argued: “In poor households, female incomes significantly help reduce levels of poverty.”

However, some middle-aged men also argued that WPD helps poor households. One 52-year-old married school teacher (FG2) stated: “Poor women are working outside (of the home) and are also joining NGOs to fulfill (their) family needs. For one’s survival, there is no other way...”

**Reducing male breadwinning responsibilities.** Of the young men interviewed, some expressed hopes that WPD could reduce male breadwinning responsibilities. Their comments show that WPD could help husbands in two ways: by supporting husbands with additional income and by helping husbands by allowing them to use loans. One educated unmarried man (25 years, FG3) expressed the following: “Despite uneasy feelings... men benefit. It (WPD) reduces economic pressures for men to support their families.” One educated married man (35 years, FG4) also explained how men’s loan needs can be supported through WPD: “Loans cannot be taken without the support of women... women are helping their husbands.” Another young married man (32 years, FG4) with less education further described how WPD has emerged as a “good way” of addressing male needs: “We know that loans are only given to women, but we do not know why... However, we get access to loans with help from our wives.”

**Improving family health.** Despite being a less commonly expressed view, some men also stressed that WPD can improve family health. They emphasized that female participation in immunization and in maternal and child health programs can improve overall family health. The subcategory “improving family health” was developed from individual interviews held with a 60-year-old married man:

*It is good that women can contribute to their families and repay their loans independently. This also helps men, as their economic responsibilities are in turn reduced. However, such income should be used to support family wellbeing... WPD is also important because it provides women with access to health care services such as maternity check-ups and childcare. Women can go to school to get an education. Education can enhance their knowledge and intelligence, so women can be educated and can get a job so that they can take care of their families and children’s health.*

## Valuing Female Independence

Despite being a less commonly expressed view, both young and old men noted that they valued female independence and human dignity while conveying their views on female participation in development. The category “valuing women’s independence” is represented by three subcategories: (a) enhancing the status of women, (b) advocating for gender equality, and (c) underscoring women’s safety/welfare.

**Enhancing the status of women.** The younger men who regarded WPD as crucial for enhancing women’s socioeconomic status in a patriarchal social order stressed the importance of women’s self-reliance and elaborately discussed why development initiatives should have an exclusive focus on women to improve the overall status of women. One unmarried man (26 years, FG4) with a university degree described his gender transformative stance: “It is good when women participate in development activities. Actually, women can become self-sufficient through these activities. This is also good for the country...” Another unmarried university student (23 years, FG3) explained why he supported women’s incomes through WPD:

*The status of women is quite poor in our country ... therefore, when women get jobs, they not only contribute to their families but also enhance their own status... Someday they (women) can become self-reliant... I welcome this change (women’s empowerment through WPD), and I want to see that women are also playing vital roles in society...*

To a lesser extent, this view was also expressed by older men as shown through one individual interview with a 76-year-old married man who was a freedom fighter in 1971. He clearly stressed the importance of women’s dignity:

*Our country is a poor one. We are all poor. So this form of development can help women earn an income of their own, which can reduce family poverty. Women can also stand on their own feet. It is good that it is helping women. In this modern era, women should be educated. When they receive an education, at least they can have a job and live with human dignity without help from others. Women should equally participate in all spheres of social life. Even more women should join the police and army, become border guards, etc. ... I think men and women should have equal rights and access to parental property, including land property. According to Hadith, I believe that there is no reason to not give equal property rights to women. Women and men should have an equal right to choose a spouse and to have children...*

**Advocating for gender equality.** The subcategory of “advocating for gender equality” was mainly touched on through conversations with the young men. Educated younger



men most frequently stressed gender liberalism and justice. For example, one 24-year-old unmarried, educated, and unemployed man (FG3) said: *“Men should not be upset by the leading role of women in income generation while women should also not behave in ways that make men feel disheartened.”* Another educated unmarried man (26 years, FG3) expressed his gender transformative views with a focus on the need for male engagement in household affairs: *“We say that women are not working... But, they undertake significant home-making duties and of course this work has value. We should ascribe value to this...”* Additionally, some young men with less education stressed the husband's role in home-making as well as women's equal rights in terms of household decision-making. For instance, one 31-year-old married man (FG4) stated: *“If both men and women can work outside of the home, a husband and wife can share cooking responsibilities as well...”* Another young married man (32 years, FG4) argued that women should participate in decision-making: *“A woman must play an important role in household decision-making when she is assuming (economic) responsibility.... Men should not be upset with this...”*

**Underscoring women's safety/welfare.** The results reveal diverse views on the influence of WPD on women's safety and wellbeing. Some interviewees claimed that WPD can limit cases of domestic violence. For instance, one 24-year-old educated unmarried man (FG3) expressed his views on the positive effects of WPD: *“... (WPD) is improving the status of women in the family and is also limiting their exposure to violence.”* However, in the individual interviews, men highlighted potential risks related to WPD and expressed how WPD should be executed to ensure women's safety. One 76-year-old married man expressed his views on women's safety in relation to WPD:

*When a wife is more educated than her husband – this is not a problem for those who are wise. It can be a problem for others... I realized this from my own life experiences. Most people will say that ‘women should behave like women, but my view is different from the other 90% of people in this village, as I have my opinions on women's welfare. When a loan is used to buy food or when it is misused by husbands to fuel addictions, this creates trouble for women. Loans are actually controlled by women's husbands, so when women ask their husbands to repay a loan, they are treated poorly or are even beaten. I think that while husbands are alive, loans should not be given to their wives, as loans are used by their husbands even though responsibility for the loans is still assumed by women.*

## Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a broad theme related to *“feeling challenged by fears and hopes”* that shows

variations among men on their views on women in development initiatives in rural Bangladesh. Consistent with the propositions of an intersectional perspective on gender (Shields, 2008), the findings identify that men's beliefs on and experiences with WPD are, to some extent, shaped by their sociodemographic identities. The study identifies variations in men's views from fears of losing male authority to practical realizations of how WPD can boost family welfare and support gender equality (see Figure 2).

The older married men predominantly expressed conservative views of women and of their participation in development. These men often perceived WPD as a threat to their prevailing patriarchal family authority. However, among the middle-aged married men and young married and unmarried men, there were those who exhibited fears of losing male family guardianship. This implies that they often oppose female participation in development and believe that women should be confined to home-making work. The older men also stated that female participation in development outside of the home is a violation of traditional religious and family norms, which can exacerbate male distress and family problems. The present study identified that men exhibiting a dominant view of masculinity were those who were most afraid of losing their male authority as a result of women's increasing incomes and levels of independence. These findings are in line with those of Haque & Kusakabe (2005); Islam and Karim (2011–2012); Schuler et al. (1998); and Yount et al. (2016), which describe married Bangladeshi men's masculine identities as patriarchal and dominating. Another study conducted in Honduras (Vonderlack-Navarro, 2010) depicted similar masculine traits whereby men hindered female participation in development. However, the present study further identifies that men can oppose women's professional development/freedom when they are afraid of losing male authority. These findings indeed support the propositions of masculine traits as portrayed in the patriarchy theory where men are socialized to maintain their “supremacy” through controlling and restricting women's freedom and rights (Connell, 2002, 2005; Dobash & Dobash, 1979).

Consistent with the line of intersectionality of gender identities (Shields, 2008), the present study further identifies that the men interviewed were not homogenous. Some men supported WPD for enhancing the socioeconomic conditions of families. These men viewed WPD through an efficiency perspective and argued that WPD is not only critical to improve the socioeconomic conditions of the family but also to ensure male wellbeing. The young (married and unmarried; highly educated and less educated) and middle-aged men interviewed argued that contributions of female income can help mitigate burdens on men to act as breadwinners. A few older/middle-aged men (all

married) also view WPD from this logical point of view. Vonderlack-Navarro (2010) revealed similar rational masculine patterns in Honduras, where some men have facilitated female participation in development initiatives.

The present study also identifies the presence of liberal and possibly gender transformative masculine qualities, but to a fairly low extent among men in the studied villages. These men stressed the rights of women and argued that there should not be any discrimination between women and men in terms of their access to resources and benefits. They expected that WPD could enhance female independence, safety, and gender equality in a patriarchal society like Bangladesh. Likewise, it appeared that regardless of their marital status, education and occupation, to a low extent, younger and older men maintained liberal views of female participation in development. These data are generally consistent with another study conducted on South Asian countries (Kaiser, Amin, Ganepola, Hussain, & Mostafa, 2015) that apparently challenged the notion of dominant masculinity and reported that men can also support gender equality. Therefore, in accordance with the intersectional perspective of gender (Shields, 2008), these findings identify another variation of masculine identity where a group of younger and educated men outwardly maintain liberal views toward women's rights and gender equality.

In short, the present study highlights that men's perceptions of female participation in development are contextual and sometimes dependent on their age, education level, and religiosity. Mainly less-educated older men maintained views of gender traditionalism, while there were signs of more moderate views toward female participation among the middle-aged and younger men. It was among the young that quite liberal beliefs on WPD were identified even if this result was not exclusive to this group. These findings are generally compatible with arguments on the intersectionality of gender construction (Shields, 2008) and further identifies how individual men can construct dissimilar views of masculinity that can vary from man to man. The study also identifies how masculine identities are context-specific and can take different forms, in contrast to those of the dominant/hegemonic model of masculinity for a particular gender order (Connell, 2002, 2005). The present findings provide support for the intersectionality of masculinity in that there is no unique pattern of masculinity in rural Bangladesh. The study not only identifies that views of masculinity can vary according to a man's age, education level, occupation and marital status, but also that there can be heterogeneous views on masculinity among men of particular groups. In relation to women's incomes and increased levels of autonomy in rural Bangladesh, the study further reveals a shift among Bangladeshi men, indicating a change in the gender order toward more equality and justice.

## Strengths and Limitations

The study participants were drawn from diverse socioeconomic groups, allowing us to capture various male views according to age, education level, occupation, and marital status. As a tool for data collection, the FGDs allowed us to develop an understanding of masculine debates on WPD in rural Bangladesh. The individual interviews also allowed us to elaborate further on some important issues and to increase the credibility of the results. The first author's long-term engagement with the examined communities also facilitated relaxed interactions with the respondents, which largely improved the quality of the data. One of the FGDs included too many participants to produce detailed data. However, it inspired an intense discussion and the participants openly shared their views. Peer-debriefing sessions with local colleagues as well as a triangulation of data analysis procedures between the researchers increased the credibility of the results. The transferability of results relies on the description of study settings and on the sampling of theoretically relevant informants. Although the present study is one of the few studies to address masculinity issues related to female participation in development in rural Bangladesh, it generally fails to address factors that shape men's various masculinities. The study design used is also limited in terms of explaining how individual men's views can vary depending on their personal/familial experiences with WPD.

## Conclusions

In this study, the views and reactions of men on married women's participation in development generally conform to dominant views of masculinity prevalent in rural Bangladesh. However, the study also reveals variations among men, providing in-depth insight into a range of male perceptions on WPD. While the prevailing literature often portrays rural Bangladeshi men as part of a patriarchal community, the present study notably identifies that men's perceptions of WPD have gradually shifted from a fear of losing male authority to a realization of women's roles in family welfare, in turn leading to hope for gender justice. In the context of dominant patriarchal traditions of rural Bangladesh, these findings provide a new understanding of the dynamics and variations among men, which may have significant implications.

The study suggests that WPD may have unexpected health consequences for women with an affiliation with male traditionalism. WPD is likely to threaten traditional male authority, which may escalate male frustration, family conflicts, and domestic violence. On the other hand, WPD, through the interplay of male sensibility/liberalism, can encourage female independence, the sharing of household responsibilities, and family harmony.

## Practical and Policy Implications

This study specifies the importance of recognizing different masculine views on female-focused development interventions in rural Bangladesh. The study results suggest that multiple masculine issues should be strategically incorporated into development initiatives targeting female empowerment and gender equality in rural Bangladesh. Female-focused development initiatives should sensibly involve the participation of local men at different stages of project implementation. Development initiatives may also involve a mechanism for how to use prevailing liberal voices for WPD in a particular locality. There could be community-based participatory interventions to challenge traditional gender norms where younger and more educated liberal men could be incorporated as local resource persons to educate those who are worried about loss of male authority. The study findings further suggest that gender education is essential, as this contributes to more open debates and discussions on gender relations. In turn, this may sway men in favor of liberal and harmonious views of masculinity while encouraging female empowerment, improving marital wellbeing and preventing the occurrence of domestic abuse. The study suggests that WPD should embrace gender-redistributive policy strategies. The study specifically identifies that female-focused development should:

- (a) Encourage men to change their patriarchal attitudes toward women's rights and responsibilities. Specific policies should be designed to help men give up certain male privileges and to take on new responsibilities to achieve gender equity.
- (b) Address societal-level patriarchal norms by initiating community actions whereby liberal men are given a chance to discuss their view on the importance of the redistribution of gender construction and responsibilities.
- (c) Consider the social and ethical consequences of their service provisions and practical strategies and be sensitive to gender and power relations to avoid perpetuating inequalities through socioeconomic and health-care initiatives.
- (d) Undertake appropriate educational measures to address dominant views of masculinity in rural Bangladesh. Local residents should be educated on gender transformative attitudes toward women.

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