Changes in villagers’ knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes concerning gender roles and relations in Bangladesh

Md. Abdul Alim

This article examines the changing status of villagers’ knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes towards gender roles and gender relations over time. Data were collected from eastern areas of Bangladesh through surveys and in-depth interviews. Findings show that knowledge about discrimination, empowerment, violence against women, and marital issues increased remarkably, and attitudes on those issues changed positively – but not as much as expected. Traditional patriarchal norms, values, culture, and social structures still operated as barriers to gender equality.

KEY WORDS: Gender and Diversity; South East Asia

Introduction

Gender inequality is typically thought of either as an individual problem or in terms of socially determined roles. Conceptualising gender as an individual issue can lead to reinforcing differences rather than similarities between men and women (Thomson and Walker 1989). The notion of gender roles may serve to reinforce inequalities where such roles are viewed as ‘natural’, as ‘a set of expectations for behaving, thinking and feeling that is based on a person’s biological sex’ (Kilmartin 2000: 20). Another dimension, adopted by Udry (2000), is grounded in biological determinism, in which gendered behaviour is thought to be a direct product of biological forces.

The notion of ‘inherent’ and ‘natural’ gender differences is revealed in socio-biological and evolutionary theories of psychology. From the basis of male and female reproductive roles, it is argued that men developed aggressive and competitive behaviours, while women developed nurturing and supportive tendencies. Thus, socio-biological and evolutionary theories assume that gender roles are both functional and natural (Barnett and Hyde 2001). The roles of men
and women have also been explained from a psychoanalytic perspective, which also suggests that gender roles serve functional purposes. Evidently the assumptions and views posited by traditional theories concerning gender roles are no longer compatible with current concepts of gender in relation to work and the family. Sjorup (1994) notes that specific gender roles in relation to parenting and to the world of work have gone beyond the mere division of labour. For instance, fathers often take an active role in parenting, and women are pursuing professional careers.

The expansionist theory does attempt to incorporate modern conceptions of women, men, work, and the family (Barnett and Hyde 2001). It has four principles. The first claims that multiple roles are beneficial to the physical, mental, and emotional health of both sexes. The second states that several processes contribute to the positive effects of multiple roles, such as social support and added income. The third principle recognises that there are specific conditions that are likely to ensure the beneficial effects of multiple roles: for example, time management and the quality of the various roles. Finally, the fourth principle notes that psychological gender differences tend to be minor.

So, the word ‘gender’ refers to roles and responsibilities of women and men that are socially determined (WHO 1998). Gender roles are highly variable and are determined by social, economic, political, and cultural factors (DFID 2000). Like race and ethnicity, gender is a social construct which defines and differentiates the roles, rights, responsibilities, and obligations of women and men. The innate biological differences between the sexes form the basis of social norms that define appropriate behaviour for them and determine the differences in social, economic, and political power between them. Although the specific nature and degree of these norms vary across societies and over time, at the beginning of the twenty-first century men and boys are still typically favoured, receiving more resources and opportunities than do women and girls – factors important for the enjoyment of social, economic, and political power, and well-being.

Male privilege has been part of the culture of Bangladesh since time immemorial. Within the household and beyond it, men exercise control over women’s labour, their sexuality, their choice of spouse, their access to labour and other markets, and their income and assets through local decision-making and legal bodies (Baden et al. 1994). In other words, men mediate women’s access to social, economic, political, and legal institutions. Women are dependent on men throughout their lives, from father through husband to son. State legislation and institutions underpin this gender subordination and dependence, in spite of constitutional affirmations of sex equality. The difference between men and women in terms of economic and social status (Table 1) confirms the extent of gender inequity. Indisputably women are highly disadvantaged in comparison with men, and their economic and social rights are still unrecognised. How can the global community remove such gender disparities and thus achieve gender equality, and in turn empowerment of women – which is the focus of the third Millennium Development Goal?

Overcoming such tremendous gender imbalance will require a range of interventions the world over. Advancing knowledge about gender roles and relations, and thereby changing perceptions of and attitudes towards them, is one of the best ways of achieving gender equality.

The causal model assumes that knowledge (information, understanding, skills obtained through education or experience, or the state of knowing about a particular fact or situation) will influence perceptions (i.e. ideas or beliefs based on how people see or understand something) and attitudes (the way in which people think and feel about somebody or something), and eventually behaviour. Of course, knowledge influences both perceptions and attitudes, but these do not necessarily translate into changes in behaviour.
In 1994, BRAC (founded in 1972 as the Bangladesh Rehabilitations Assistance Committee) embarked on a government-initiated Gender Quality Action Learning (GQAL) staff-training programme. In 2001 this was expanded to members of BRAC Village Organisations (VOs) on a pilot basis, with similar goals, but focused on fostering gender equality and equity among the villagers. One of the key issues and concerns raised through training was the identification of the villagers’ knowledge about similarities and dissimilarities between men and women in the socio-economic and cultural context: issues such as access to food, education, and health care. The programme also focused on women’s decision-making power within the household, the division of labour, and access to and control over resources. The main purpose of this programme is to create a positive attitude in rural areas towards women’s empowerment and to improve gender relations in the family, society, and organisations at the village level.

The programme selected ten upazilas (sub-districts) in two districts to implement the GQAL programme in 2005 and 2006. A total of 1200 men and women were given GQAL training. They were selected from ultra-poor households, moderately poor households, VO members, and members of union parishad (the lowest unit of government administration). The trainees worked as educators and conducted 7200 Uthan baithaks (courtyard meetings) in their communities. People living near the educators also participated in the meetings. In addition, use was made of other educational devices, including videos on gender-based violence and discrimination, and popular theatre on gender equity. The expected outcomes were increased knowledge and awareness among the villagers about gender roles and relations; better understanding of the rationality of joint ownership of family resources; and the increased participation of women in decision making in the family, thus establishing gender equality within both the household and community.

### Table 1: Gender differentials in economic and social status in Bangladesh (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income-generating activity rate (excluding ‘housework’)</td>
<td>85.3</td>
<td>63.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share of employment in agricultural activity</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>51.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share of employment in non-agricultural activity</td>
<td>85.0</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of paid workers earning &gt;Tk 300/week</td>
<td>61.7</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average monthly income (Tk) of household</td>
<td>2909</td>
<td>1892</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share of unpaid family labour</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>74.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy rate (11+ years)</td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td>37.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net enrolment rate at primary level (boys and girls)</td>
<td>85.6</td>
<td>88.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share of enrolment at the secondary level</td>
<td>71.5</td>
<td>28.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child mortality rate (per 1000 population)</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average life expectancy</td>
<td>55.9 years</td>
<td>54.4 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: 1 BASS 1992; 2 Ahmed et al. 2002; 3 Ahmed et al. 2005; 4 GOB 1990; 5 UNICEF 1992. There is little reliable evidence on this, and figures vary, but in all sources women’s life expectancy is lower than that of men.
This article examines whether the villagers’ knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes towards men and women in general, and towards discrimination, empowerment, violence against women, and marriage-related issues in particular, had changed after the intervention.

Methodology

The study used individual household surveys, attitudinal scales, and in-depth interviews in order to gain a better understanding of gender roles and gender relations. The survey focused on collecting socio-demographic data that helped to measure knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes towards gender. Information was collected through structured questionnaires on five themes (Table 2), for each of which there were five statements on which the respondents were asked to agree or disagree. Their attitudes in each case were captured in a four-point Likert scale – completely agreed, partially agreed, partially disagreed, and completely disagreed. Each statement was given numerical weight from 4 to 1, ranging from complete agreement to complete disagreement. A higher score meant a more favourable attitude towards gender roles and relations.

The cumulative score on a given theme represented the respondent’s attitude towards it, with the possible scores on each theme ranging from 5 to 20. In-depth interviews further explored the respondent’s attitudes, theme by theme, to find out how respondents rationalised supporting or disagreeing with the statements, with a special focus on interpreting their cognition and influences shaping their attitudes.

Sampling

Baseline data were collected in May 2005, and post-intervention information was collected in September 2006. Eight out of ten areas from two districts, Netrokona and Kishoreganj, were selected, because there had been intervention in those areas. Again from each area, one to three spots1 were selected, because some had fewer interviewees than required.

From each spot, respondents were categorised as rich, middle, lower, or ultra-poor, using Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) methods. In each spot, the study included all the household heads in the latter two groups; of those classified as ‘middle’, 20 per cent were chosen at random from the list in the PRA record kept on file in the local area office, as were 10 per cent of those classified as ‘rich’. Approximately equal numbers of women and men were included.

The baseline survey was done on the basis of 803 samples, of which 120 respondents were randomly selected for interviews to elicit how they rationalised their attitudes towards different themes. Men and women were selected from each category, but not from the same household. Although very elderly people were excluded from this component, people from different age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General perceptions about men and women</td>
<td>Gender role within household, equality, division of labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>Inequality in nutrition, health, education, workload</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Decision making within household, mobility outside home, and social participation in shalish (traditional system of justice)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence against women</td>
<td>Dowry, divorce, perception of violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>Early marriage, forced marriage, polygamy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Themes and issues related to gender roles and relations
groups were selected in order to see whether age had any bearing on attitudes towards gender roles and gender relations. The numbers sometimes varied among the spots if the ultra-poor were insufficiently represented. In the post-intervention phase, the total sample dropped to 737 for the survey and 96 for in-depth interviews, because of migration and deaths.

Knowledge of selected gender issues

Gender discrimination and violence are prevalent in Bangladesh, taking various forms of expression. Many factors contribute to this situation, and ignorance or lack of information contributes to its continuation. In order to obviate the ignorance factor, the GQAL programme sought to provide information to the villagers. The respondents’ knowledge of selected issues (which are part of their daily lives) on various themes relating to gender roles and relations was considered for intervention by the programme. The selected issues were as follows:

- Education should be compulsory: boys and girls should be educated up to at least Class 5.
- Inherited property should be divided in a 2:1 ratio between males and females.
- Boys and girls should have the same amount of food.
- There should be universal suffrage at the age of 18 years.
- Punishment for dowry transactions should be five years’ imprisonment and a fine of Tk. 5000.
- Divorce should be effective after 90 days.
- The legal age of marriage should be 18 years for a man and 21 years for a woman.

The respondents’ knowledge about these matters was measured before and after the interventions on these issues, to see whether there were any changes, and the extent of such changes. The former was measured by dividing the changes in knowledge of the respondents into three categories: increased, unchanged, and declined. An average of the cumulative scores on specific issues measured the latter.

Almost half of the respondents were shown to have increased their knowledge about compulsory education (47.3 per cent) and the legal age of marriage for men (51.3 per cent) over time (Table 3). A slight increase was observed on the rest of the issues. In general, the degree of knowledge of the overwhelming majority remained unchanged, while a small number of respondents’ knowledge declined post-intervention; women’s knowledge increased more than men’s.

Table 3: Change in knowledge level among the respondents (n = 554) (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>1*</th>
<th>2**</th>
<th>3***</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compulsory education</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutrition</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property inheritance law</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting age for Bangladesh</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punishment for giving/taking dowry</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correct divorce laws</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal age of marriage for men</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal age of marriage for women</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1* = increased, 2** = unchanged, 3*** = declined
Perceptions of gender

What should and should not be done by men and women, both within the family and outside it, defines how respondents perceive gender roles and relations. Their perceptions on similar themes were also elicited, such as their views of male and female roles and responsibilities in the family; sex preference for the first-born child; education and food for boys and girls; husbands’ and wives’ access to health treatment and rest, and decisions on family planning; male and female roles in decisions on buying and selling household necessities and assets, and using the proceeds; the participation of females in shalish (traditional justice system); their mobility outside the home, specifically whether they could go outside without the permission of husband or other older family members; and perceptions of different types of violence experienced, relating to how respondents react on issues of violence.

Men and women perform different types of role in the family and the society. By and large it is assumed that women should take care of household activities such as cooking, managing household belongings, and caring for family members; while men should deal with productive activities (i.e. activities that economists can count) outside the home, shopping, etc. The intervention tried to change this perception to create greater gender equality. Findings show that a little change took place in respondents’ perceptions of household work, shopping, and bringing up children at home, but otherwise conventional assumptions changed very little.

A positive change was observed on the questions of who should teach children at home, and who should participate in remunerated work. A significant number of the respondents believed after the intervention that women should participate in such activities. But there was no effect on the perceptions of men or women on the subject of cooking: both continued to believe that this was a job for women only.

Son-preference for the first child declined significantly, from 72 per cent to 31 per cent, and there was a corresponding increase in the proportion of respondents who expressed no sex preference (17 per cent to 60 per cent). Education is compulsory for all children, but in Bangladesh there is a perception that boys should be preferred. There was an increase of 50 per cent among respondents who after the intervention emphasised the importance of education for both sexes.

There is also a norm that the husband should run the family and therefore should remain fit. Thus, when both he and his wife fall sick, the husband should be given treatment first. The intervention proved effective here, with a drop of 39 per cent in the number of respondents believing that the husband should be treated first, and an increase of 42 per cent in the number believing that both should be treated at the same time.

Respondents’ perceptions of male and female food requirements also changed after the interventions, with 58 per cent stating that women have the same nutritional needs as men – far more than before the intervention. Similarly, after the intervention an extra 31 per cent favoured joint decision making on family planning.

Household members own different types of assets, and the belief persists that men should have exclusive control over them. A modest change regarding buying and selling assets was seen after the intervention. While overall perceptions concerning the use of sale proceeds remained almost unchanged, responses depended on the nature of the assets in question. A small increase (12 per cent) was observed in the view that both husband and wife should be involved in decisions to purchase land, and a more significant change (about 16 per cent) regarding decision making in the ‘buying’, ‘selling’, and ‘using of the sale proceeds’ by the father-in-law. On the other hand, perceptions changed negatively on the question of whether only the husband or only the wife should decide on buying livestock and domestic goods, as they did on the question of who should decide about how the proceeds from land sales should be used.
Participation of women in *shalish* is an indication of their empowerment, but a well-established belief prevails that only men should proceed. Before the intervention, 95.3 per cent of the respondents believed that women should not participate in *shalish*, but after it 54 per cent had changed their view on this issue.

A prevalent belief is that women should stay at home and do household work. The intervention attempted to change perceptions regarding women’s mobility, but it had almost no success in this respect. There was a modest change in views about the acceptability of a woman going alone to selected places, but virtually no shift in the question of her requiring permission to do so.

The definition of what constitutes violence against women was explored in relation to common types of violence such as beating, verbal abuse, disgrace, mental torture, food deprivation, or preventing a woman from visiting her father’s home. Perceptions on most of these issues changed little, with most not regarding ‘disgrace’ or preventing visits to the wife’s father’s home as a form of violence. The views of male and female respondents were similar before and after the intervention. There is another kind of violence related to marriage, whereby a girl is married without being consulted: in other words, the parents decide, and their daughter’s opinion is not thought to matter. The intervention brought about some change in relation to the need to respect the girl’s own decision.

### Attitudes towards gender

To assess changes in attitudes towards male and female status over time, quantitative and qualitative types of information were used. In the quantitative analysis, attitudes were measured by the number of respondents whose score increased, remained unchanged, or declined. An increased score means that the respondents did not want to discriminate between men and women in relation to the issues being addressed. If a score remained unchanged, this meant that views had not shifted as a result of the intervention. Some respondents had more positive attitudes towards gender roles and relations before, rather than after, the intervention.

Results show that the attitude scores of the majority of the respondents increased, meaning that they showed more positive attitudes on questions of sexual discrimination, women’s empowerment, and violence (both general and marriage-related); on the other hand, the scores of a modest number of respondents declined, meaning that they showed negative attitudes after the intervention. The scores of an overwhelming number of respondents increased in terms of their general attitudes towards men and women. On the other hand, the attitude scores of approximately 15 per cent of respondents declined on questions of discrimination, violence against women, and marriage. The attitude scores of approximately 14 per cent of respondents on the subjects of violence against women, discrimination, and marriage remained unchanged after the intervention.

The attitudes of the respondents shown in the quantitative analyses (summarised in Table 4) are also almost similar in the qualitative analyses. Figure 1 shows that the attitude scores of the respondents increased on all gender-related issues after the intervention. But the respondents’ attitude scores on general views of males and females tended to increase more than scores on other issues. The respondents also rationalised why they had positive or negative attitudes on those issues, as discussed below.

### General attitudes towards men and women

Attitudes towards men and women reflect social norms and values on the division of labour in the household and equality of the sexes. The traditional belief in male superiority confers a
range of advantages on men, backed up by the pretext of religion. Respondents who had ingrained attitudes towards men and women rationalised these by saying that men are superior to women because the male is more intelligent and takes decisions on important matters, and that women are physically weaker than men. One male respondent said, ‘According to Islam a man is equal to two women’. A female respondent said, ‘The creator Himself creates woman as weaker being’. Others held that women should not be treated unequally, because they have equal rights in every sphere of life. Moreover, women could contribute equally to the household income, help to build society, and participate in leadership. ‘There is no law that man is superior to woman’, one respondent said.

There were also entrenched beliefs about the proper division of labour in the family. If a man does a job that is usually done by a woman at home, he will be severely denigrated. One said, ‘The man who does woman’s work will be ram/sheep (disgraceful)’. Others argued that if a man helped his wife, the job would be easier and quicker. This would increase income, family peace, and love, and would save time and thus remove gender discrimination. Supporting this, a respondent said, ‘Songsar sukker hoy ramonir gune, gunban poti thake jar ghare’ (A qualified wife can bring happiness for the family if a good husband is with her).

**Discrimination**

There is a common belief that as the boy will be the future breadwinner he should be given priority in access to education, food, and so on than a girl, although some respondents

![Figure 1: Attitudes of males and females before and after the intervention](image)

**Table 4:** Changes in attitude scores among respondents after the intervention (n = 554) (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>1*</th>
<th>2**</th>
<th>3***</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General attitude towards men and women</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence against women</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1* = increased, 2** = unchanged, 3*** = decreased
argued that parents should not discriminate against their daughters. Not educating a girl might create problems such as her becoming spoiled or disrespectful toward her parents. But a girl could do a job and also take care of her parents after her education. According to one respondent, ‘If a mother is educated, her children will be educated and she will get an educated husband’. In terms of nutrition, boys’ and girls’ needs were perceived by some respondents to be the same. A lack of proper food might hinder the girl’s intellectual development.

**Empowerment**

It is widely believed that as the man is usually the only income earner he should make all decisions affecting the family. If this norm is violated, there will be quarrels and family upheaval. Few respondents held this attitude, with most believing that husband and wife must have equal responsibility in the family. Besides, women may be entirely responsible for their families, so their opinions in decisions on household matters should be equally heard. This would enhance the relationship between husband and wife and bring economic improvement to the family. Joint ownership of household assets reduced violence against women and would provide security for them.

The respondents who disapproved of women’s participation in *shalish* argued that the men’s prestige might decline, and those who participated would be treated as bad women. One respondent said, ‘Woman is prohibited to participate in *shalish* because they create chaos in that’. But there was disagreement on the question of whether women should participate in *shalish* for their own interest, such as to get real justice. In a few cases they were regarded as having better knowledge to do *shalish*.

There is a traditional norm that strongly discourages a woman’s mobility without her husband. A few respondents agreed with this: ‘After marriage a girl should sacrifice her life to give services to her husband and family members. She should follow husband whatever he orders to do.’ But most of the respondents disagreed with this attitude. They thought that, if necessary, a wife should go out alone. It is her human right. If she was not allowed to do so, family peace would be destroyed and the marriage would break down.

**Violence against women**

Beating women is a very common form of violence in Bangladesh. Most of the respondents agreed that physical assault did not resolve problems. There were many consequences of domestic abuse: for instance, the marriage might break down; it might bring about economic loss; and the wife might even commit suicide. But one respondent said, ‘Beating wife is similar to beating cat’.

On the other hand, respondents had both positive and negative attitudes towards giving and taking dowry. Those who supported dowry argued that it could help a husband to run a business. It might increase the wife’s status in her father-in-law’s home. Those who disagreed argued that the wife’s father might run into debt in order to raise dowry money. Giving dowry encourages the practice still further. Dowry might bring about other consequences, such as a husband beating his wife for dowry, causing her to commit suicide. A respondent said, ‘Giving dowry means that in broad day light things are robbed’.

**Marriage-related violence**

Respondents had different attitudes towards the appropriate marital age for girls, and differing opinions on the subject of marriage. Those who disapproved of late marriage for a girl argued
that girls should be married as early as possible, because otherwise they might form an illicit sexual relationship with any boy in the community, or even elope. Youths might annoy the girl on her way to school and make bad remarks. In addition, the older a girl is, the more difficult it is to get her married, which might mean the payment of a higher dowry. If the girl is married quickly, parents might get rid of such tension.

Those who disagreed said that early marriage might cause health problems for a girl, and that she might even die during her first pregnancy. Besides, child marriage is illegal in Bangladesh. One respondent commented, ‘The life of a girl is more valuable than status’. If they are educated, girls can contribute to their parents’ well-being as well as to their husband’s family. Another respondent said, ‘If jackfruit is ripe, the tree does not feel burden’. Regarding the proposition that the girl’s opinion on the choice of a marriage partner is important, respondents showed very positive attitudes. They recognised that if marriage took place without the girl’s consent she would not behave well with her husband, and in the long run the relationship might break down. There might be bad consequences if the girl’s opinion is ignored: she might commit suicide or return to her father’s home, which would be a burden for her parents and jeopardise the family’s prestige. A respondent said, ‘In Islam [the] girl’s opinion is necessary to get married’, while another said, ‘To get a girl married by force is a kind of violence against her’.

Conclusion

The theoretical discussion and studies of gender roles and relations give an insight into how people’s perceptions of and attitudes towards gender are formed and sustained. Ideas about gender are shaped by people’s norms, values, and beliefs, and also by the socio-economic and political situation. Traditional gender roles and relations always favour the male, and it takes a long time to change people’s embedded perceptions, attitudes, and behaviour. This has many implications for development, which is why so many national and international organisations and institutions have sought to address gender-based barriers, though with inconsistent effects. The GQAL programme invested a lot of effort in this regard and registered some success in shaking traditional norms, beliefs, and customs. It had an impact on the knowledge of the respondents, and some attitudes changed remarkably.

On important issues pertaining to the villagers’ life, around half of the respondents’ knowledge remained unchanged, which meant that they were already aware of the issues previously, although some learned from the intervention. It was also found that there had been no change in knowledge levels in 77 per cent of cases on the subject of ‘nutrition’, in 53 per cent of cases on ‘inheritance law of property’, and in 59 per cent of cases on ‘correct divorce law’, where levels of knowledge were the same before and after the GQAL interventions. A small number of respondents (13 per cent) were aware of the ‘punishment for taking and giving dowry’, and in 5 per cent of respondents there was no change in knowledge about the ‘legal age of marriage for men’.

On the other hand, changes in perceptions on certain issues still were not sufficient. It was supposed that factors such as traditional social norms, values, and customs, the lack of all kinds of opportunity for women, and lack of proper training might have impeded such changes. Perceptions relating to the division of work between men and women in the family, decision making on household assets, participation of women in social activities, especially in shalish, and violence against women did not change as expected. It was also noted that there were not many changes in knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes of men compared with women in this regard, probably because men did not have much time to participate in uthan baithak. They usually had to travel outside the village to find work.
Although the GQAL programme succeeded in improving the attitudes of some respondents, a significant number remained neutral on questions of discrimination, violence against women, and marriage. Men were relatively less positive about any changes in gender roles and relations, compared with women. A few disapproved of women breaking *purdah* (seclusion) and losing *izzat* (honour) and challenging male power. Villagers blamed the dominant traditional cultures for shaping such attitudes.

In conclusion, I would say that changing human perceptions and attitudes takes a much longer time than project-based interventions normally allow. But within such a very short period the speed of changes in respondents’ knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes towards gender roles and relations was remarkable. It is to be hoped that these changes will translate into a positive impact on people’s behaviour to bring about gender equality.

**Note**

1. Once the villages are selected, several participatory wealth-ranking exercises are conducted to cover all possible locations where the extremely poor live. These sub-village locations are known as ‘spots’, which typically constitute 100–150 households.

**References**


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