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Gendered recordkeeping practices in marginalised communities in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Introduction. Little is known about gendered recordkeeping practices in marginalised communities in developing countries and about how these practices have been affected by improvement in literacy in those communities.

Method. This paper reports the results of semi-structured interviews with 20 women and 17 men in two remote areas of Bangladesh about their recordkeeping practices.

Results. This paper shows that the female interviewees tend to preserve information more frequently than the male interviewees and that women are assuming more responsibilities in relation to keeping the important records of their family. The greater role assumed by women can be related to a rapid improvement in women's literacy in the past 30 years. However, comments made by interviewees show that this greater responsibility attributed to the female members of the households is not a reflection of women's empowerment. At the contrary, it is often an additional burden imposed on them since the women write down what their husbands expect them to write and keep the records that their husbands ask them to keep.

Conclusion. This study highlights the importance of doing more research on gendered recordkeeping practices and on their connections with women's empowerment in marginalised communities.

Introduction

Little is known about gendered recordkeeping practices in marginalised communities in developing countries and about how these practices have been affected by improvements in literacy in those communities. Recordkeeping is not a neutral activity, it is contingent on social and cultural norms and beliefs, including gender roles and expectations. Records are essential enablers of economic and social activities. In marginalised communities, for whom accessing information is difficult, capturing and preserving information that has been accessed so that it will be easy to re-access it if needed in the future can be beneficial. Due to improvements in women's literacy, women can play a greater role in regards to family recordkeeping than they did in previous generations.

This paper reports the results of semi-structured interviews with 20 women and 17 men in two remote areas of Bangladesh about their recordkeeping practices. It starts with a brief literature review on gendered recordkeeping, a discussion of literacy statistics in the areas where the research was conducted and an explanation of the methodology followed. Then, the findings section shows that the female interviewees tend to preserve information more frequently than the male interviewees and that women are assuming more responsibilities in relation to keeping the important family records. However, the author argues that this greater responsibility attributed to the female members of the households is not a reflection of women's empowerment. At the contrary, comments made by the interviewees indicate that it is an additional burden imposed on them by their husbands. The paper concludes by stressing the importance of doing more research on gendered recordkeeping practices and on their connections with women's empowerment and the empowerment of marginalised communities in developing countries.

Literature review

The creation and use of records are impacted by the socio-economic conditions in which they are created and by the values, ideas and aspirations of their creators and users. Social circumstances influence what information individuals have access to, how they interpret it and how they are able to capture it, preserve it and use it (Nesmith, 2006). Ketelaar (2005) wrote that recordkeeping is not a neutral activity, but contingent on social and cultural norms and beliefs. In many societies, women are considered to be the guardians of the family memory (Ketelaar, 2005), '*the customary nurturers and keepers of family tradition*' (Davison, 2000, p. 81). Research conducted in Iceland showed that women were traditionally regarded as the keepers of the family's records, mementos and memorabilia because they were responsible for the home while the men were working outside (Tucker and Bogadóttir, 2008). However, very little research has been conducted on recordkeeping practices in developing countries.

Ketelaar wrote in 2005 that gendered recordkeeping, in particular, had not yet been recognised sufficiently by scholars and practitioners in archival studies. Gender influences what records individuals have access to, what information they are interested in, how they can access it and use it, and what methods they can use to capture and preserve important information and records. Rutkair (2011) argued that gender constitutes an important element of the societal provenance of records. In the past ten years, several authors have applied feminist theory to rethinking the construction and use of archives (Dever, 2018; Caswell & Cifor, 2016; Caswell, 2021; Lapp, 2023). However, these studies have focused on records intended to be preserved as archives because of their cultural value rather than on records needed to meet the pressing socio-economic needs of their creators in the short term, and overwhelmingly on Western urban settings. No research has been done about gendered recordkeeping in developing countries where women are still subject to many socio-cultural restrictions and the ways they interact with information are greatly restricted by the socio-cultural expectations imparted on to them as daughters, wives and mothers.

Bangladesh is a developing country affected by frequent flooding and natural disasters where 45% of the population make their living from agriculture. It is a context where capturing information previously accessed and keeping it for future reference can save arduous journeys to nearby towns in search of information from government officials. It is also a country where women living in rural areas are still restricted by socio-cultural and religious norms that make it difficult for them to leave their homes and their villages to access information that would enable them to take advantage of economic opportunities (Lewis, 2011; Frings-Hessami & Oliver, 2023).

Little research has been done on recordkeeping and information preservation practices in rural areas of Bangladesh. However, two previous studies conducted by the author in the same areas as the research for this paper provided the motivation for this research and offer interesting points of comparison. The first study conducted in the southern sub-district of Shyamnagar found that villagers who had limited access to smartphones and to the internet were very conscious of the fragility of digital technologies and used paper notebooks as a form of backup for information that they found on the internet (Frings-Hessami, 2023). That study, which was based on a relatively small sample of interviews, also found that both men and women wrote information in notebooks and that they wrote the same types of information, such as the names of medicines, fertilisers and pesticides recommended by the local vets or found online, or new farming techniques learnt during training sessions. Although the study found differences between the ways men and women accessed information due to the fact that men were more likely to have a smartphone that they could use to access information, it did not find any significant differences in the ways men and women kept records and preserved information. The second study conducted in the sub-district of Dimla in the north of Bangladesh found that all the female participants asserted that in their families, women were in charge of keeping the family's important records, such as land titles, birth certificates, diplomas and identity cards (Frings-Hessami, 2024). The women in this study also used notebooks to write information that they found important. The two studies showed that more research should be done to understand the potential differences between the recordkeeping practices of men and women in marginalised communities of Bangladesh.

Literacy levels in Bangladesh

Literacy levels in Bangladesh have improved dramatically in the past 30 years from 38.9% in 1991 to 76.56% in 2021 for men and from 25.5% in 1991 to 72.82% in 2021 for women (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2014, p. xi; Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2022, p. 17). The gap between male literacy and female literacy has closed down. However, inequalities remain between rural and urban population.

According to the 2011 census, in the sub-district of Dimla, only 43.6% of the rural men and 38.8% of rural women were literate (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2014, p. 449). The census defined literacy as 'the ability to write a letter in any language' (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2014, p. 6). In terms of educational achievements, the 2011 census reported that 41.28% of rural men and 47.36% of rural women in Dimla had not completed any schooling and 21.15% of the men and 19.6% of the women had completed four years or less of schooling (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2015a, pp. 209, 226).

Literacy rates are higher in the sub-district of Shyamnagar. According to the 2011 census, 52.6% of the rural men and 43% of the rural women were literate (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2014, p. 358), and 65.11% of rural men and 63.71% of rural women had more than 4 years or less of schooling (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2015b, pp. 273, 278).

In those two sub-districts, the improvement in literacy is reflected in the differences between the literacy levels of adults aged 20-24 and those aged 40-44. The 2011 census reported that among the rural population aged 40-44 in Dimla, 14.67% of women and 29.5% of the men were literate, whereas 59.77% of the women and 61.13% of the men aged 20-24 were literate (Bangladesh Bureau

of Statistics 2015a, pp. 154-155). In Shyamnagar, 46.12% of the rural men and 22.62% of the rural women aged 40-44 were literate, compared to 72.1% of the men and 69.31% of the women age 20-24 (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2015b, p. 176).

Methodology

This paper reports the findings from semi-structured interviews conducted in January 2023 in two remote and marginalised areas of Bangladesh: in the sub-district of Dimla, district of Niphamari in the north of the country and in the sub-district of Shyamnagar, district of Satkhira in the south of the country. Twenty women and 17 men (10 women and 7 men in Dimla; 10 women and 10 men in Shyamnagar) were interviewed about the ways they access information and about their recordkeeping practices. All the interviewees, male and female, were involved in agricultural activities. In addition, 5 officers from local NGOs who were working on development projects in each area (3 in Dimla and 2 Shyamnagar, all male) were also interviewed.

The interviewees were selected by local NGO officers who were well acquainted with the communities so as to represent a variety of age groups. Tables 1 and 2 present the demographic characteristics of the community people who were interviewed. They show that the education level achieved by the participants is higher in Shyamnagar than in Dimla, which is in line with the general statistics for those two areas. The male interviewees are older than the female interviewees in both locations, which is a reflection of the greater availability of older men to attend an interview because younger men are more likely to be working away from home. All the interviewees from Dimla are Muslims, whereas the majority of the interviewees from Shyamnagar are Hindus, coming from predominantly Hindu villages.

Interview questions were prepared by the author who had previously conducted research in both areas, but the Bangladeshi research assistant who conducted the interviews in Bangla was advised to conduct the interviews in a semi-formal way and to follow up interesting comments with additional questions. The interviews were audio-recorded with consent from the participants, then translated into English by Bangladeshi research assistants before being analysed. The author read each interview transcripts several times and coded the emerging themes in an iterative way. Findings relating to information literacy, to information behaviour and to information preservation will be discussed in other papers. This paper focuses on an interesting, and unexpected theme that emerged while re-reading and analysing the transcripts, that of gendered recordkeeping and its connections with women's literacy and empowerment.

Participant code	Gender	Age	Religion	Education level
DW1	F	40	Muslim	Grade 4*
DW2	F	22	Muslim	Middle school certificate
DW3	F	22	Muslim	Grade 5
DW4	F	22	Muslim	Middle school certificate
DW5	F	21	Muslim	Middle school certificate
DW6	F	40	Muslim	Grade 5
DW7	F	40	Muslim	Grade 9
DW8	F	27	Muslim	Grade 8
DW9	F	35	Muslim	Grade 8
DW10	F	22	Muslim	Grade 8
DM1	M	33	Muslim	Grade 8
DM2	M	26	Muslim	Postgraduate
DM3	M	42	Muslim	Grade 5
DM4	M	32	Muslim	Middle school certificate
DM5	M	50	Muslim	Grade 8
DM6	M	50	Muslim	Grade 5
DM7	M	51	Muslim	Grade 8

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of community participants - Dimla.

* Grade 4 means 4 years of schooling, Grade 5: 5 years of schooling, etc

Participant code	Gender	Age	Religion	Education level
SW1	F	35	Muslim	Grade 4
SW2	F	34	Hindu	College
SW3	F	28	Hindu	Grade 10
SW4	F	30	Hindu	College
SW5	F	35	Hindu	College
SW6	F	38	Hindu	Postgraduate
SW7	F	30	Hindu	Grade 10
SW8	F	38	Muslim	Middle school certificate
SW9	F	27	Hindu	High school certificate
SW10	F	36	Hindu	Postgraduate student
SM1	M	39	Hindu	High school certificate
SM2	M	52	Muslim	Grade 7
SM3	M	33	Hindu	Middle school certificate
SM4	M	28	Hindu	College
SM5	M	23	Hindu	Postgraduate
SM6	M	?	Hindu	College student
SM7	M	43	Muslim	College
SM8	M	Over 60	Hindu	Grade 8
SM9	M	30	Muslim	Grade 8
SM10	M	Around 50	Hindu	Grade 8

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of community participants - Shyamnagar

Findings

Preserving important records

The interviews showed that in most families, women are now in charge of keeping the important records of the family. However, there are some significant differences between the two sub-districts in which interviews were conducted.

In the northern sub-district of Dimla, all the female interviewees reported that they were responsible for keeping the important records of their family (see Table 3). They explained that it was their responsibility because they were home all the time while their husbands were working outside. Most of the male interviewees (6 out of 7) also said that the female members of their family, usually their wives were responsible for keeping the important records, but some of them commented that they organised the records, then gave them to their wives to keep them safely. For example, DM5 asserted that he organised the important documents in files and explained to his wife how to keep them in order. Similarly, DM7 commented that *'I organised everything and give it to her [his wife] and tell her to keep all these things carefully'*. DM1 stressed that in case of flood, it was him who carried the records to safety over his head. DM6 commented that the practice used to be that the male elders were in charge of keeping the money and the important things, but that nowadays *'money and other important things are stored by the wives.'*

Participant code	Person responsible for looking after the family records
DW1	self (wife)
DW2	self (wife)
DW3	self (wife)
DW4	self (wife)
DW5	self (wife)
DW6	self (wife)
DW7	self (wife)
DW8	self (wife)
DW9	self (wife)
DW10	self (wife)
DM1	women
DM2	women
DM3	wife
DM4	self (husband)
DM5	wife
DM6	wife
DM7	wife

Table 3. Responsibility for important family records - Dimla

In the southern sub-district of Shyamnagar, most of the female interviewees (8 out of 10) also reported that they were responsible for keeping the important records of their family. Only one woman said that her husband was responsible for looking after all the records, while another woman said that her father-in-law kept the important records of the family, such as land records, but that she kept her identity documents and her birth certificate herself. However, most of the male interviewees declared that taking care of the important records was the responsibility of the men in their family. Five of them said that they took care of the records themselves, one said that his father did it, and two said that they did it conjointly with their wives, while only two of them said that their wives were responsible for taking care of the family records.

Participant code	Person responsible for looking after the family records
SW1	husband
SW2	self (wife)
SW3	self (wife) & father-in-law
SW4	self (wife)
SW5	self (wife) & husband
SW6	self (wife)
SW7	self (wife)
SW8	self (wife)
SW9	self (wife)
SW10	self (wife)
SM1	self (husband) & wife
SM2	self (husband)
SM3	self (husband)
SM4	self (husband)
SM5	father
SM6	self (husband) & wife
SM7	self (husband)
SM8	wife
SM9	self (husband)
SM10	wife

Table 4. Responsibility for important family records - Shyamnagar

Although the contrast between the answers of the male and female interviewees may be due to the small size of the sample, it could also be explained by the different ways in which the male interviewees and the female interviewees interpreted the question. The men's answers reflect their desire to show that they are in charge of their family's affairs and their understanding that although their wives are responsible for the day-to-day task of looking after the family records (e.g. have the key to the box in which the records are kept so that they can access their identity documents when their husbands are away), the men are responsible for making the decisions on what records to keep and how to keep them. The women's answers, on the other hand, reflect the actual responsibility that they assume on a day to day basis.

It is interesting to note that although most of the interviewees from Shyamnagar were Hindus (9 out of 10 of the women and 7 out of 10 of the men), the three Muslim men admitted that their wives were responsible for or shared the responsibility of looking after the family records, whereas 6 out of the 7 Hindu men said that it was the men's responsibility. However, given the small size of the sample, this potential correlation requires further research.

Preserving information in notebooks

The interviews showed that the practice of writing information in notebooks so that it can easily be accessed when required is common in the two areas of the study, but with some interesting differences between the two areas and between the practices of the male and female interviewees.

In Dimla, most of the female interviewees (7 out of 10) said that they wrote down in a notebook information that they found important, such as names of fertilisers and pesticides for their crops and of medicines for their animals. They also keep track of their income and expenses by writing them in a notebook. One young woman (DW5) also reported that she likes to write stories. Two of the three interviewees who did not write information were illiterate (DW1 and DW6). DW1 nevertheless understood the importance of writing down important information and regularly asked her daughter to write information, such as the names of medicines for their animals and

names of seeds, in a notebook for her. Only one interviewee (DW8) said that she rarely wrote information because she preferred to go and ask her experienced relatives who lived nearby when she needed information.

All the male interviewees from the same area, except one, said that they wrote information in a notebook, but most of them admitted that they did not write much. The interviewee who did not capture information (DM7) declared that he did not do it because when he needed advice, he just went and asked the agriculture extension officers for it.

Female and male interviewees agreed that women write more than men. The women attributed this to the fact that the men work outside the home for long period of time whereas the women stay at home. Some women mentioned that the men in their area were less literate than the women and one of them reported that her husband could not write. DW1 commented that: *'The women write more. The men in our area are less literate. Nowadays we are educating girls more'*.

However, the fact that the women write more is not just a reflection of the education achievements of younger women, it is actually the result of men's expectations that their wives will retain useful information, as well as keep track of all their income and expenses. DW7 commented that *'The men are mostly outdoors. So, we, women, tend to write [information] more, and then we give this to the men, and they use it'*. And DW10 explained that women write more than men because *'men always ask about records from the women'* and *'women can't remember all the time'*. The men from their area agreed with this explanation. For example, DM2 admitted that most of the writing was done by the women and that the men told them what to write: *'The advice comes from us. We told them to write it down. They preserve the information by writing it'*. However, one of the men (DM1) reported a more egalitarian approach to capturing information. He said that both he and his wife wrote information in notebooks: *'Whenever one of us gets the opportunity, we write'*.

The three NGO officers from Dimla who were interviewed agreed with the comments that women write more than men. According to one of them, in the houses where women are literate, they do most of the recordkeeping because men do not get much time. He commented that: *'So men usually tell women the price of things and ask them to write it, and this is how they keep the record of things.'* Another NGO officer concurred that women are more inclined to write things down than men, and that usually the males would tell the females: *'you write it down and keep it with you.'*

The interviewees revealed a bigger contrast in Shyamnagar where all the female interviewees said that they write down some type of information in notebooks, but few men did. Most of the women (8 out of 10) write down agricultural information, while two women do not write agricultural information, but write information that they find important such as important dates, or information that they find interesting. SW9 who is a postgraduate student as well as a farmer's wife commented that she wrote whatever she felt like, for example song lyrics.

On the other hand, most of the men from that sub-district declared that they did not write down agricultural information because they felt that they could memorise the information that they needed or that they could easily get information when they needed it by going to the local shops. Those who wrote down information said that they wrote very little and in an unorganised way on pieces of paper that they put in their pocket and may not find again when they need them. Several of them said that they wrote phone numbers in a small notepad and one of them also mentioned that he wrote the names of medicines for his family. An older man (SM8) commented that he used to write down information, but that because his eyesight was not good, he asked his children to do it for him. And one of the younger men (SM4) who did not write agricultural information reported that he was writing songs and lyrics because he was interested in making music. However, all the men said that they took charge of writing the income and expenses from their aquaculture activities.

Like in Dimla, the female interviewees commented that women write more than men. For example, SW1 declared that: *'the women in this area have some educational qualifications so they try to write down as much as possible'*; and she added that: *'men don't do this much'*. The two male NGO officers from Shyamnagar who were interviewed agreed that the tendency of writing agricultural information was more common among women than men. However, none of the men from that location admitted that the women wrote more than the men. Three of them asserted that their wives did not write information and SM7 said that his wife could not write. As discussed in the previous section, the discrepancy between the comments made by the men and those made by the women could be due to the small size of the sample or could be a reflection of the men's reluctance to admit that they are not in charge of all the affairs of their family. Given that the male NGO officers concurred with the views of the female interviewees, the latter explanation is more likely, although it is also possible that the men might not be aware of how much agricultural information their wives were preserving to support the activities, they were responsible for, such as growing vegetables and raising chickens and ducks near their homes.

Discussion

The interviews showed that in most families, women are now in charge of keeping the important records of the family. This is in contrast with the practice of previous generations when the male elders were assuming that responsibility as the head of the family. This new responsibility can be linked with improvements in female literacy in the past 30 years. In some families, the women have higher education levels than the men. In previous generations when women were not literate, they were not given the responsibility to look after the family records. However, the reason usually given for entrusting the women with that responsibility is that they are at home all the time while men work outside the home all day or may be away from the village for work for months at a time. Although the women like having access to the records they need for themselves and their children when their husbands are away, they also see this as one more responsibility for them.

Women also write down more information in notebooks than men, but several interviewees, male and female, asserted that this is because the men tell them to do it. In particular, husbands expect that their wives will account for every cent they spent. Therefore, the wives have to carefully write down all their expenses. In some cases, men also ask their wives to write down agricultural information. Like looking after the family records, this is one more chore that is being imposed onto the women.

However, writing down agricultural information in notebooks to preserve it for future reference is something that women often do of their own initiative because they understand the benefits of doing it. This is particularly useful in communities which do not have access to smartphones (Frings-Hessami, 2023) as is the case of the majority of the participants in this study since preserving information saves them the time and the cost of having to find the information again. And this is even more important for women who are restricted in their movements due to cultural expectations. Therefore, although looking after records and writing down the information that their husbands asked them to keep are additional chores for the women, writing down information that they believe is useful to them and their families, if they can spare the time to do it, can be seen as beneficial and liberating. Some young women also enjoy doing other types of writing in their spare time, such as keeping a journal or writing recipes.

The men, on the other hand, are more focused on keeping track of the income and expenses of their agricultural activities and less interested in writing agricultural information because they can more easily access information when they need it by going to the agricultural supplies shops or talking to agriculture extension officers. They delegate some of the day-to-day tasks of looking after the family records and keeping track of income and expenses when they work outside the home, but still see themselves as the persons in charge of those tasks in their households.

Conclusion

The findings from this study show that Bangladeshi rural women assume important responsibilities in relation to keeping the important records of their family and capture useful information that their family may need in the future. These new responsibilities can be related to literacy improvements. However, they do not constitute an indication of women's empowerment since those responsibilities are imposed on to them by their husbands who give them clear directions about the records to preserve and the way to preserve them. Therefore, the findings from this study show that there is a need for more research on gendered recordkeeping practices and on the connection between recordkeeping and women's empowerment in marginalised communities.

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