

## ROLE AND STATUS OF THE RURAL ELDERLY IN BANGLADESH: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY

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**Abstract:** This study mainly explored the role and status of the elderly in rural Bangladesh. It is based on empirical findings from the four villages of Gopalnagar union of Dhunat upazila of Bogra district. Mixed approach has been given priority in this study. Survey, observation, case study and life history methods and focus group discussion technique have also been used in this study. Data have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. Simple random sampling procedure followed in this study. This study has found the declined role and status of the elderly in the family and the society as well. The study may give some necessary directions for both academic and policy related benefits by drawing attention to the government as well as the policy makers to take the elderly problem seriously and form a policy framework to the welfare of them with a view to making old age better.

**Key Words:** Role, Status, Elderly, Patterns, Changes

### INTRODUCTION

The role and status of the elderly in the context of rural society of Bangladesh has become an emerging topic of discussion and a serious academic discourse in the present era. Sociology is a scientific study of social relations among humans in the society. The social relation of elderly with society has gone changed due to the increase of the percentage of the elderly and its complicated pattern. Demographers are also thoughtful for the increasing number of elderly. Gerontology, the study of ageing and the elderly, concerns itself not only with the physical process of growing old, but also with social and cultural factors connected to ageing (Kinsella and He 2009). Their number is increasing gradually as an issue which is not separated from social integration, gender advancement, economic stability or poverty. Demographically, population ageing is a global phenomenon and Bangladesh is also not left untouched by this demographic reality (Rahman 2010). Thinkers of various disciplines and development planners almost agree that until the year 1961, both the birth and death rates were high. With this, the proportion of aged population was at a low level. But at present their number is increasing rapidly. The global population aged 65 and over was estimated to be 70 crore (Rahman 2005). In the developing country the average percentage of elderly is 15% of the total population. In South Asian countries, the total population is about 200 crore. Among them 14 crore is elderly. It

is estimated that in 2025 it will be 277 crore and 32 crore (Bangladesh Demographics Profile 2013). In Bangladesh, the percentage of elderly population is about 8.56 (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2008). In 2025, it will be about 9% and in 2050 it will be about 17%. Bangladesh, the eighth largest (147.3 million in 2008) and one of the most densely populated countries (966 persons per sq. km. in 2007) in the world has started to experience another emerging issue of population ageing in its highly vulnerable population and development context (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2001). In 2007, the number of the elderly people aged 60 and over in this country was 9.41 million and it has increased from 1.94 million in 1951 which is quite phenomenal.

Bangladesh right now has the third largest number of old people after India and China and it is also frightening problems in the rural areas (Help Age International 2006). About 7.7% aged people are living in rural areas in Bangladesh. So, the number of elderly is significant in terms of our total population. From the literature it is evident that the elderly in the past contributed a lot for the betterment of family, society and country by their stock knowledge, experience, wisdom and activities. They were also treated as the important guardians, mediators and members of the family and society. Now they are being stereotyped, according to the report of the researchers, by the members of the family, society and country in various ways. They are also considered as the

threat to national income, source of increasing dependency, creator of generation gap and social problems. Older people are being left out, excluded from the normal day to day activities of the society. Moreover, they are, according to Burgess, thrusting into a state of social inactivity that may be termed as role less role (Burgess 1960). They observe in their everyday life that the society focuses, advertises, and welcomes the young rather than the old. So they feel that society is just for the young generation. They think that they have no option but to be treated in many cases as an unattractive, unproductive, unintelligent, unemployable and less important social group. That is, the elderly think that they are in a state of less role and status. Hence, it is an urgent need to know their role and status and its patterns and changes.

#### **METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATION**

Methodology means a general orientation about how research is done (Marvasti 2004). It looks at how the research has undertaken and introduced the design used to collect the data for the research. It also explores the research instruments used by the researcher in the collection of primary data, the sampling method, data collection procedure and the analysis of the collected data. In this study qualitative and quantitative research approaches have been adopted and applied. The researcher followed an exploratory approach as it aims to explore the influence of wealth on the enjoyment of role and status of the rural elderly in Bangladesh. Mixed approach, (that is quantitative and qualitative) especially has been given priority in this study. Several research methods have been used in this study. They are social survey, observation, focus group discussion, case study, life history etc. In this study, four villages of Gopalnagar union from Dhunat upazila of Bogra district have been selected randomly. The names of the villages are: Konagaty, Sholiabari, Razarampur and Ariamohan. Although at present about 7.4 percent of our population is elderly, their percentage in these villages is near about 8.0, 7.6, 8.8 and 8.1 (Kabir 1994). There are various scopes of doing research on the issue related to aging in this area. Unfortunately, as far as I know, no research work has been conducted here. Besides, the socio-economic, cultural and demographic features of these villages are almost the same. Luckily, I am well accounted with them and their socio-economic and demographic settings because I am a man of this region. So, it has become obviously helpful for me to collect data. I have visited the villages several times before the fieldwork. During those visits I also met the inhabitants of the area and discussed the matter to

convince them for the purpose of the study. They shared their problems whole heartedly with me. So, I also think that the findings of the four villages of this research will provide the real insight of whole rural Bangladesh. Simple random sampling method has been used for this research to the selection of unions and villages. In this respect lottery system has been adopted to choose the union and villages. The reason is, in this method, each individual has an equal probability of being selected from the population, ensuring that the sample will be representative of the population. On the other hand, the district and upazila have been selected purposively. The reason behind this purposive selection is, at present the percentage of the elderly in Bangladesh is about 7.4, the average percentage of elderly in Bogra district is about 7.9 and in Dhunat upazila it is near about 8.6.

#### **Objective Of the Study**

The objectives of a research summarize what is to be achieved by the study. These should be closely related to the research problem. It must be interrelated, brief and realistic rather than vague and highly ambitious. The objectives of the study also explain the purpose of doing, where it will be done, who the subjects are, what will be done in the research etc. To speak concretely, research objective must be clearly stated and be specific in nature. The objective of this study is to assess the role and status of the rural elderly and its patterns and changes.

#### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The study may give some necessary directions for both academic and policy related benefits. As a contribution to knowledge, this study may also focus on micro level investigation to understand the real issues of old age- role, status, aging, ageism, age discrimination, age prejudice, age stereotype, age stratification, decision making process of the elderly, influence of wealth on the enjoyment of role and status, the role and status of the elderly in family and in rural community, and overall aspects of the elderly in the context of sociology and social gerontology. Besides, it has dealt with a study of role and status of rural elderly in Bangladesh in the light of the influence of wealth. So, the outcome of the study will advocate for taking a national policy for the elderly of Bangladesh. Those who are young today will be the elderly in future. So, it is necessary to undertake empirical study on their role and status to establish sustainable policies in socio-economic matters. And the findings of the study may make the people conscious and old age better.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The family in Bangladesh has been regarded as a basic element of a solid kinship and social organization. It is a shelter of every man and woman. People pass their lives from their birth to death in their family and community. It is the real protector of its member from various dangers and worse condition. In our society the elderly are supposed to enjoy a respectful status in the family and community. Normally they occupy a position of prestige and privilege and sometimes power also. In every matter the family members would seek help from the elderly. The members of the family would always take guidance from the elderly. Actually, the elderly were the guardians for performing many activities. They had absolute power in solving familial problems. Every activity was done according to the decision by the elderly. Now these situations have changed. In the study area it is observed that the elderly are to do various activities in their family. They have little time to spend their time in the leisure activities. Although the elderly in the rural community had significant and prestigious roles and status, it has also declined greatly. Whether they are too much able or not, in maximum cases they are to perform various household activities. Basically, families are front and centre in a life course perspectives because it is the primary setting where individuals of many ages are assembled together and have relationships that span many decades. This is because; educational and occupational attainment, marital and fertility patterns, and health outcomes are strongly conditioned by family background and resources. It is social ties which tend to enjoy better physical and mental health which is available in family and rural community. But increase in the number of the elderly affected family structures as well as ways of living. It is true that the old men and women had supreme authorities within and over their families, solely empowered to take ultimate decisions. Now a young person can come out of the bindings and order of joint family with ease and without hesitation as he or she has several options to earn money and support him or herself. So, the control of centralized power within a family is non-existent. Persistent poverty and increasing landlessness led to changes in household structure in the rural areas. Many poor elderly have to live alone due to unemployment in the agricultural sector which forces young people to move to the city for work for long periods, or a particular season. The elderly of our rural society in the past were held high regards in family and rural community. They were heads of the family, and advice was sought from

them on range of issues. Their word was final in setting disputes in family and rural community. Actually the family and village community would look upon them as the pillars of the family and society. At present their position in these places has become very complicated. Their role and status has also become very complicated.

**Table No.1: If the Elderly Have Work for The Family**

Age Group	Work for the family				Total	%
	Yes	%	No	%		
60-65	103	50.7	15	7.4	118	58.1
65-70	27	13.3	2	1.0	29	14.3
70-75	31	15.3	4	2.0	35	17.2
75-80	4	2.0	4	2.0	8	3.9
80-85	4	2.0	3	1.5	7	3.4
85-90	3	1.5	3	1.5	6	3.0
Total	172	84.7	31	15.3	203	100.0

The elderly in the rural society like ours are to do many unpaid, invisible, and informal work in the family. Sometimes they voluntarily do the work. Again, sometimes the work is imposed upon them. They are to do many works in absence of their sons and sons' wives. If they do not do these types of unpaid works for their family, it is not possible for the members of the family to do the paid work for the family. So, visibly it may seem to us that the elderly are not doing paid works; silently they are helping to do that work through helping family members. The table above clearly signifies that among elderly who are in the age group of 60 to 65 among them 50.7 % have works for the family. Besides, they are the young old. They are capable of doing maximum types of work. On the other hand the elderly who are above eighty years old have little work for their family due to worse physical condition.

**Table. 2: If the Elderly Carry Out Simple Chores In The House**

Age Group	Male				Female			
	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%
60-65	20	20.8	26	27.1	63	58.9	9	8.4
65-70	9	9.4	6	6.3	13	12.1	1	0.9
70-75	10	10.4	14	14.6	10	9.3	1	0.9
75-80	-	-	5	5.2	-	-	3	2.8

80-85	1	1.0	2	2.1	1	0.9	2	1.9
85-90	-	-	3	3.1	1	0.9	3	2.8
Total	40	41.7	56	58.3	88	82.2	19	17.8

From the table it is also understandable that 41.7 % male elderly carry out simple chores in house whereas 58.3 % do not do this. It is also noticeable that about 82.2 % female elderly carry out simple chores in the house whereas 17.8 % cannot do this. So, female elderly in the rural society carry out more simple chores in the house than male ones because society assigned the division of labor for male and female in the society.

**Table. 3: If the Elderly are Given Priority at Time of Arranging Marriage In The Family**

Gender	Response				Total	%
	Yes	%	No	%		
Male	89	43.8	7	3.4	96	47.3
Female	87	42.9	20	9.9	107	52.7
Total	176	86.7	27	13.3	203	100.0

From the description of the above table it is said that, 43.8 % male and 42.9 % female elderly replied that they are given priority at the time of arranging marriage in the family. Again, 3.4 % male and 9.9 % female elderly are not given importance about it. That means the elderly in rural Bangladesh have still good relations with social institution.

**Table. 4: If the Elderly are Sought Suggestion by the Family Members Regarding Education Ff Children**

Gender	Response				Total	%
	Yes	%	No	%		
Male	21	10.34	75	36.94	96	47.28
Female	18	8.88	89	43.84	107	52.72
Total	39	19.22	164	80.78	203	100.0

From the table above it is also obvious that 80.78 % elderly including 36.94 % male and 43.84 % female

have no role to educate their grandchildren. The family members are not interested in taking any kind of suggestion from them. Merely 19.22 % elderly including 10.34 % male and 8.88 % female is taken into consideration about this issue. From them, the percentage of female is less than the male elderly. The study has found some valid reasons in this respect. It has been stated earlier that maximum elderly do not know how to read and write. Limited elderly have only ability to sign. Higher education is almost absent among them. So, the family members do not seek advice from them about this issue.

**Table.5: If the Elderly Take Part in Religious Activities**

Age group	Response			
	Yes	%	No	%
60-65	101	85.6	17	14.4
65-70	25	86.2	4	13.8
70-75	32	91.4	3	8.6
75-80	8	100	-	-
80-85	7	100	-	-
85-90	6	100	-	-

Although religions vary in doctrine, practice, organization, feelings and its rituals, the social functions of it, both for the religious group itself and for the wider society, can be classified as contribution to pattern maintenance, tension management and social solidarity. Social functions of religion help the elderly relief from worldly sufferings. The changing age structure of populations affects all social institutions including religious ones. Perhaps, considering this religion was important area of inquiry for the classical theorists in the social sciences. Through the writings of Durkheim, Weber, William James, Karl Marx, Karl Mannheim it is well understood to us all. For an example from the Weber we take the idea that specific religious belief has psychological consequences for human motivation, suggesting that the differing beliefs of the world's religions ageing and the aged may have specific consequences for those older persons whose late lives are lived out in those communities. The table depicts that there is a relationship between the increasing of age and involving in religious activities. In old age, people have a tendency to be pious. The rural elderly involve themselves in religious activities when their age increases. When they are in 60-65 about 85.6 % take part in religious activities, and when 65-70, the percentage is about 86.2 %. By this way, it is found that those who are 80 years and above take part in this activities.

**Table. 6: Position of Elderly in Family Especially For Buying and Selling Necessary Things**

Gender	Position						Total	%
	Good	%	Bad	%	Don't seek suggestion	%		
Male	82	40.4	4	2.0	10	4.9	96	47.3
Female	75	36.9	6	3.0	26	12.8	107	52.7
Total	157	77.3	10	4.9	36	17.7	203	100.0

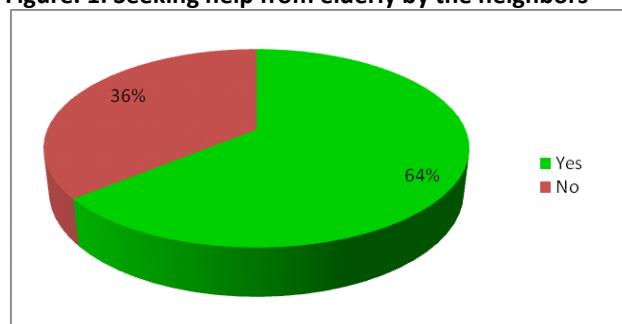
The table presents that the position of the elderly in buying and selling necessary things for the family is good. In this case, the percentage of male is 40.4 and female is 36.9. It is mentionable here that about 4.9 % male and 17.7 % female elderly are not asked for this purpose.

**Table. 7: If the Family Members Seek Opinion Of The Elderly at Time Of Election**

Sex	Family Members Seek Advice At The Time Of Election				Total	%
	Yes	%	No	%		
Male	57	28.1	39	19.2	96	47.3
Female	39	19.2	68	33.5	107	52.7
Total	96	47.3	107	52.7	203	100

Data shown in the above table explain that 52.7 % elderly including 19.2 % male and 33.5 % female replied that their family members do not seek permission from them at time of election. On the other hand 47.3 % elderly including 28.1 % male and 19.2 % female replied that their family members seek advice from them at the time of election. It indicates the changing status of the elderly.

**Figure. 1: Seeking help from elderly by the neighbors**



The neighbor plays vital role in rural society and the position of the elderly in this case is guardian, counselor and mediator. In this table it is understandable that 64.0 % neighbors come to the elderly for help and 36.0 % elderly replied that they

are not needed to their neighbor. They think that it is the result of social change. They also think that neighbors do not come to them for not having their wealth and social prestigious position.

**Table. 8: If the Neighbors Seek Advice From Elderly At Time Of Marriage Of Their Sons Or Daughters**

Head of the family	Neighbor Coming To Elderly For Taking Advice Before Marriage Of Their Sons Or Daughters				Total	%
	Yes	%	No	%		
Self	73	36.0	40	19.7	113	55.7
Son	23	11.3	35	17.2	58	28.6
Daughter	-	-	2	1.0	2	1.0
Husband/ wife	11	5.4	14	6.9	25	12.3
Others	2	1.0	3	1.5	5	2.5
Total	109	53.7	94	46.3	203	100

The elderly have leadership role which they can play in building better communities. They can motivate other people to get involved in community development. They come to their neighbor with a view to helping them in many ways. They can use their skills in helping the neighbor especially in arranging marriage. It was a tradition in rural society that before mate selection the elderly were asked as to the bride/ groom. Now, it has undergone a change. In this matter, 53.7 % elderly replied that the neighbor comes to them, and 46.3 % replied negatively. It is also noticeable here that people come to the head of the family regarding arranging the marriage in the family.

**Table. 9: If the Elderly are given Priority to Watch Television Programs**

Age group	Response			
	Yes	%	No	%
60-65	31	15.3	87	42.9
65-70	10	4.9	19	9.4
70-75	7	3.4	28	13.8
75-80	1	0.5	7	3.4
80-85	4	2.0	3	1.5
85-90	1	0.5	5	2.5
Total	54	26.6	149	73.4

Questions were asked to the elderly whether they are given priority or not about watching television. In this respect, 26.6 % of the elderly replied positively and 73.4 % of them replied negatively. The fact behind is the want of television in these villages. There is no dish connection and electricity in these villages. Very few families have black-white television which is powered through battery or solar system. It is also mentionable here that the elderly above eighty years are not interested in

watching television because they considered it as the source of sin. In this respect it has also been found that the young elderly (60-75) are given priority and their percentage is about 23.6 %.

**Table. 10: If the elderly take part in rural development activities**

Participation	Frequency	Percent
Yes	85	41.9
No	118	58.1
Total	203	100.0

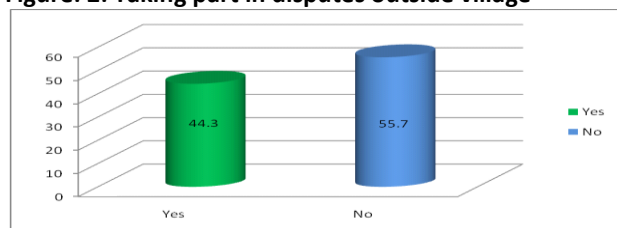
Older adults comprise a growing proportion of the rural population of our country. This population shift has far-reaching socioeconomic and political implications for people of all ages. They make valuable contributions to the society, both material and immaterial, and younger generations benefit from their experience. They can create new opportunities for both individual and societal development. From the table it can obviously be understood that merely 41.9 % elderly participate in rural development activities and 58.1 percent cannot due to various associated factors along with poverty, education and occupation.

**Table.11: If the Elderly Take Part in Family Disputes**

Age Group	Response					
	Yes	%	No	%	Total	%
60-65	97	47.8	21	10.3	118	58.1
65-70	23	11.3	6	3.0	29	14.2
70-75	33	16.3	2	1.0	35	17.3
75-80	5	2.5	3	1.5	8	4.0
80-85	6	3.0	1	0.5	7	2.9
85-90	4	2.0	2	1.0	6	3.4
Total	161	82.8	42	17.2	203	100

Taking part in resolution of familial disputes is also the symbol of enjoying role and status of elderly. The table shows that the age category of the respondents has relationship with taking part in resolving familial disputes. It is also understandable from the table that 82.8 % elderly can take part in this matter. The interesting fact is that, 47.8 % elderly in the age group of 60-65 take part in solving disputes in the family.

**Figure. 2: Taking part in disputes outside village**



Taking part in disputes outside village is also the symbol of enjoying role and status of elderly. The

table implicates that 44.3 % respondents can take part in resolving disputes outside village. It is also understandable from the table that 55.7 percent elderly cannot take part in this matter. Surely it does not depend on merely age rather than the previous occupation, connectivity to the urban society, wealth, education, power etc. of the elderly.

It has been observed from the study that among the elderly who are in the age group of 60 to 65, about 50.7 % have work for the family. Besides, they are the young old. They are capable of doing maximum types of work. On the other hand the elderly who are the above eighty years old have little work for their family due to their worse physical condition. About 41.7 % male elderly carry out simple chores in house whereas 58.3 % do not do this. It is also noticeable that about 82.2 % female elderly carryout simple chores in the house whereas 17.8 % cannot do this. So, the female elderly in rural society carry out more simple chores in the house than male one because society assigned the division of labor for male and female in the society. About 43.8 % male and 42.9 % female elderly replied that they are given priority at the time of arranging marriage in the family. About 80.78 % elderly have no role to educate their grandchildren. For buying and selling necessary things, the percentage of male are 40.4 and female are 36.9 %. About 30 % elderly including male and female are not asked for this purpose. In old age, people have a tendency to be pious. The rural elderly involve themselves in religious activities when their age increases. When they are in 60-65 about 85.6 % take part in religious activities when 65-70, the percentage is about 86.2 By this way, it is found that those who are 80 years and above take part in this activities. About 52.7 % elderly including 19.2 % male and 33.5 % female replied that their family members do not seek permission from them at the time of election. On the other hand 47.3 % elderly including 28.1 % male and 19.2 % female replied positively. About 64 % neighbors come to the elderly for help. Again 46.3 % elderly replied negatively that the neighbor do not come to them for taking advice before marriage of their sons or daughters. It was a tradition in the rural society that before mate selection the elderly were asked as to the bride/ groom. Now, it has undergone a change. In this matter, 53.7 % elderly replied that the neighbor comes to them, and 46.3 % replied negatively. It is also noticeable here that the people come to the heads of the family regarding arranging the marriage in the family. If the elderly are given priority to watch television program, 26.6 % of the

elderly replied positively and 73.4 % of them replied negatively, that is, there is no television in their family. Besides 41.9 % elderly participate in the rural development activities and 58.1 % cannot do. In the rural society influential people are those who are called for solving problems. It is also understandable from the table that near about 82.8 % elderly can take part in solving disputes in the family. The interesting fact is that, 47.8 % elderly in the age group of 60-65 take part in solving disputes in the family. About 47.9 % elderly can take part in resolving familial disputes. Nearly 44.3 % respondents can take part in resolving disputes outside village. It is also understandable that 55.7 % elderly cannot take part in this matter. From the analysis of chi-square test it is also apparent that there is a significant effect between the age group and having work for the family, ability of the elderly to do their daily activities for the family, age and the performance daily activities and age and the helping other members of the family. That is, this study has also found the declined role and status of the elderly in the family and the society as well.

### CONCLUSION

Elderly population undoubtedly is the assets of any country for their bridging and cementing role based on wisdom, knowledge, expertise and experience in the context of cultural existence. Due to over population, scarcity of resources, existing poverty, insufficient health facilities, absence of social security, changing socio-economic, cultural, demographic situation and adoption of western culture, they have become an important topic of discussion from polymorphic angles. In this study it has been identified the declined role and status of the elderly in the family and the society as well. So, for better understanding and wider generalizing about the role and status of the rural elderly and its matter of changes, there are no other important options but to undertake further empirical studies on this issue.

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