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ARE RURAL PEOPLE LIBERAL TOWARD THEIR FAMILY AND SOCIETAL RESPONSIBILITIES? EVIDENCE FROM BANGLADESH

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Are Rural People Liberal toward Their Family and Societal Responsibilities? Evidence from Bangladesh

Delwar HOSSAIN¹, Rabiul ISLAM²

Abstract

Gender ideology has long been a discussed issue in the field of social science, particularly gender studies. This study aims to explore the category of people's gender ideology toward their family and societal responsibilities in rural Bangladesh. Following a mixed-methods approach, this study interviewed 400 rural people (200 men and 200 women, between 18 and 50 years) and conducted two FGDs from eight cluster villages at Paba Upazila of Rajshahi District in Bangladesh. The result shows that people were liberal in the context of household chores and decisions (strongly agreed to share taking care of an infant, housekeeping/cooking, and freedom of choice in taking matrimonial decisions) but traditional and transitional in acceptance of male privilege and preferences for female privilege respectively. This study argues that patriarchal adherence is reflected in people's gender ideology. Our study results suggest better awareness of rural people to transform their traditional gender ideology in the family and societal responsibilities in Bangladesh. These findings add new knowledge about the gender ideology of rural people and contribute as a prior field to promote liberal attitudes among both men and women in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Gender ideology, family and society, rural Bangladesh.

Introduction

Gender ideology has largely been discussed in the explanation of family and societal well-being in different societies (Zhang & Liu, 2022; Dey et al., 2021; Audette et al., 2019; Walter, 2018; Kroska, 2007; Boerma et al., 2016; Yu,

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2018). It is defined as a set of beliefs about socially appropriate roles, rights, and responsibilities of men and women (Cheung & Choi, 2016; Dasgupta et al., 2018; Kroska, 2007). Based on their gender ideologies, there may have different types of people in a particular society, some may uphold traditional gender ideology while others may maintain liberal gender ideology (Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2016). This study aims to explore the category of people's gender ideology (traditional to liberal) toward family and societal responsibilities in the context of household chores and decisions, acceptance of male privilege, and preferences for female privilege in rural Bangladesh (Davis & Greenstein, 2009).

Bangladesh is a lower-middle-income country situated in South Asia where approximately 61% of people live in rural areas (World Bank, 2021). According to earlier studies, Bangladesh is mostly a classic patriarchy where men supremacy is viewed as the societal norms and values, and women are disproportionately submissive to men in both family and society (Karim et al., 2017; Mahatab, 2007; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, Hossain, 2012). Men in Bangladeshi society enjoy greater power and privilege just by being male and serving as the head of the family (Schuler et al., 1996). In rural Bangladesh, patriarchal gender ideology is highly prevalent, prioritizing masculinity over femininity in all settings, including school, home, labor force, and society (Karim, Habib, Arefin, et al., 2020; Schuler et al., 1996; Sultana, 2010). More importantly, women's gender ideology is also seen within the structure of patriarchy, which not only allows men to rule over women but also a woman discriminates against other women in family relations (Sultana, 2010; Hashemi et al., 1996). Karim et al. (2017) state that most men's gender ideology against women in development activities were traditional, and this ideology varies based on their socioeconomic status in rural Bangladesh. However, earlier studies show that though the socioeconomic status of women has improved, traditional gender ideology still exists (Dufflo, 2012; Zhang, 2018). Recent studies conducted in Bangladesh indicate that people's gender ideological differences may also influence an individual's behaviors in turn liberal or traditional attitudes toward others (Dey et al., 2021; Biswas et al., 2017; Karim, Habib, Arefin, et al., 2020). As an important aspect of family and societal well-being, we need to explore gender ideology among both men and women in different contexts.

It is believed that people's gender ideology is an important prior field that should be taken into account not only for the prevention of any kind of unwanted family and societal occurrences like gender-based violence, wife abuse, and sexual harassment but also to promote liberal attitudes among both men and women in rural Bangladesh. This study, therefore, aims to explore the category of people's gender ideology in different contexts in rural Bangladesh.

Literature Review

The concept of 'ideology' bears various meanings within particular cultures and literature. However, this concept is often defined as a system of beliefs/opinions that peoples use for initiating social action, integrations, and social stability (Henning, 2007). From this view, gender ideology refers to societal beliefs and attitudes regarding gender-specific roles, rights, and responsibilities of men and women, and it may reflect these attitudes generally or in a specific domain, such as an economic, familial, legal, political, or social (Kroska, 2007). It is also defined as people's views toward gender-divided roles, privileges, and obligations in family and societal life (Cheung & Choi 2016; Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2016; Davis & Greenstein, 2009; Kroska, 2007).

Gender ideology is constructed and expressed in various ways, and it may reflect thoughts on the proper roles, privileges, and obligations of women and men in family and society (Levant & Richmond 2016; Kroska, 2007). An individual gender ideology is a result of social and cultural construction, shaped through socialization, education, and experience (Davis & Greenstein, 2009). However, people's gender ideologies may range from antifeminist (traditional) to feminist view (liberal) and there may have three categories of people: traditional, transitional, and liberal (Dey et al., 2021; Cheung & Choi 2016; Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2016). In the context of traditional gender ideology men are regarded as household heads, breadwinners, and financially responsible, and women as homemakers and caregivers while in liberal gender ideology, both men and women share all types of functions such as breadwinning, care-taking, and decision-making (Audette et al., 2019; Walter, 2018; Davis & Greenstein, 2009; Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2016; Kroska, 2007). In contrast, transitional gender perceptions lie midway between traditional and liberal gender ideologies (Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2016).

Patriarchal (traditional) gender ideology is seen in rural Bangladesh where male domination is usually viewed as societal norms and values, and females are excessively submissive to men in both public and private spheres (Dey et al., 2021; Karim, Habib, Arefin, et al., 2020). In this structure, men are supposed to be confident and challenging, while women are modest and gentle. As a result, men are viewed as the head (guardian) of the households, while women are responsible for taking care of the family (Karim 2006, Karim, Habib, Arefin, et al., 2020). Unquestionably, women and girls in rural Bangladesh are culturally influenced and more likely to follow patriarchal ideology in turn male supremacy and domination over their wife's life choices; male controlled social institutions; and less access of women to properties, higher education, occupation, and income activities (Karim, Habib, Arefin, et al., 2020; Jesmin, 2017; Sultana, 2010). Previous studies conducted in rural Bangladesh also show that people's gender ideology is influenced by patriarchal ideology, which is formed and manifested in various societal structures, including family relations (Dey et al., 2021; Karim, Habib, Arefin, et al., 2020; Sultana, 2010). Studies conducted in China reveal that

traditional gender ideology is widespread in Chinese society as well as the Asian culture which favors male domination and female subordination (Zahan, 2019; Q. Xu & Anderson, 2010). Gender ideology in the African continent is also mostly male-dominated (Kyoore & Sulemana, 2019).

Although there is plenty of studies on women's empowerment and gender equality, few studies have men's gender ideology on the explanation of wife abuse or violence against women (Zhang & Liu, 2022; Karim et al., 2017; Cheung & Choi 2016; Tonsing & Tonsing, 2019) and studies on gender ideology among both women and men are lacking. A recent study by Dey et al. (2020) explored the category of men's gender ideology in rural Bangladesh representing that 55.0%, 31.3%, and 13.7% of men maintained traditional, transitional, and liberal gender ideology respectively. Previous studies conducted in rural Bangladesh also indicate that men's views and reactions to married women were traditional as well as masculinity prevalent in rural Bangladesh (Karim et al., 2017; Karim, Habib, Arefin, et al., 2020). Indeed, there is a lack of studies on gender ideology (traditional, transitional, and liberal) among both men and women in rural Bangladesh. Regarding this, we need to study gender ideology among both men and women in different cultural contexts. Thus, this study is an attempt to examine and explore people's gender ideologies (both men and women) in rural Bangladesh.

Methodology

Study Sites

The fieldwork of this study was conducted in eight villages purposefully selected from Paba Upazila of Rajshahi District in Bangladesh. The study villages were Maligasa, Dharmahata, Thakurpara, Ghipara, Tetulia, Uttar Luxmipur, Modho Dharmahata, and Huzri Para. All these study villages are located in the northwestern part of Bangladesh and around 12-15 km from the district headquarters. Prior to the selection of study villages, people's socioeconomic status and other demographic characteristics were considered.

Sampling and Study Participants

Following a mixed-methods approach, we interviewed 400 rural people (200 men and 200 women) aged 18 to 50 years from the purposefully selected study villages. Data were collected by cluster method, and each village was treated as a cluster covering 50 participants (4 clusters for men and 4 clusters for women). First, we pointed out the middle of the selected cluster village and collected eligible data from its surrounding families. Two FGDs, (one for both men and women and another for only men) were conducted to get in-depth information

and to understand and generalize the quantitative data. The demographic and socioeconomic status of FGDs participants is given below (Table 1).

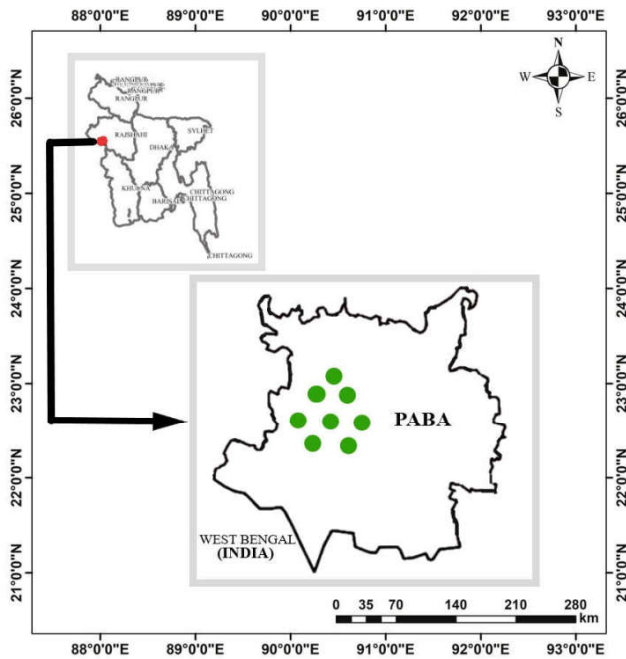


Figure 1. Geographical location of the study area

Table 1. FGDs Participants' Profile

FGDs	Age	Education	Occupation	Num. of Participants
01 (only men)	24-50 Years	Higher secondary=1 High School=4 Primary=2 Illiterate=1	Small business, day labor, housework	8
02 (both men and women)	19-40 Years	Graduate=1 Higher secondary=1 High School=3 Primary=2 Illiterate=1	Day laborer, housework, small business farmer, student	10

Data Collection

The fieldwork of this study was held between May 2022 and October 2022 to collect the required data. Data were collected from multiple sources such as interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and literature reviews (Yin, 2003). A structured questionnaire was developed for face-to-face interviews. Two FGDs were conducted from the study villages. FGDs were moderated by the first author (DH) with one facilitator who took notes, which lasted between 50 and 60 minutes. The focus group participants were asked to discuss their views and opinions regarding the rights and responsibilities of men and women in the family and social life. Both the events, including face-to-face interviews and FGDs, were conducted in the local vernacular (*Bengla*) into English with the assistance of a bilingual skilled. All of the discussions and interviews were digitally recorded with the participants' permission. Focus group discussions were used for this research triangulation.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed by using SPSS 23.0 (SPSS Inc., 2016), and qualitative data were analyzed by coding and grouping based on the study themes and aims (Islam & Walkerden, 2015; Schutt, 2011). We used qualitative data to support an interpretation of quantitative results, and this triangulation helped to strengthen the validity and reliability of the findings.

Measures of Gender Ideology

Gender ideology was measured using a scale of attitudes toward women scale (AWS) by Gelles & Straws (1979) and a 25-items short version of Spence et al. (1973) & Spence and Helmreich (1978). The AWS scale is widely used to measure men's gender ideology in the West, at the same time, this scale is also used to measure men's gender ideology in rural Bangladesh (Karim & Law, 2013; Goldson, 2005). Based on this scale and our study context, we formulated questions to measure the gender ideology of rural people in Bangladesh. The items of questions about gender ideology toward family and societal responsibilities were framed into three separate viewpoints: (a) household chores and decisions, b) acceptance of male privilege, c) and preferences for female privilege (Davis & Greenstein, 2009). The following item is an example of gender ideology: "Opinions of both girls and boys should be considered in an equal manner". However, gender ideology was measured from conservative to liberal (traditional, transitional, and liberal) and coded as 1=Agree Strongly, 2= Agree, 3= Disagree, 4=Disagree Strongly.

Ethical Issues

All ethical protocols were followed in the time of data collection. The fieldwork of this study was conducted by recommendation of the Ethical Committee of the Institute of Education and Research, University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh (ref. no 2022/2381(2), dated 17.5.2022). After securing oral consent for each of the interviews, we informed them about the study purpose and its procedures. Their consent was also taken before starting the audio recording for FGDs. The study participants were known about their unpaid engagement in this research. In addition, they also assured that all information including research data would be kept secret with maintaining their anonymity.

Findings and Discussion

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

The mean age of the respondents (n=400) was 34.84 years. Among the total respondents, 92.5% were Muslims, and 80.2% belongs to single families (Table 2). Most of the participants' educational status was 6-9 years (31.0%). Housework and agriculture were the main occupations (46.0% and 28.0%, respectively) of the study participants. The study shows that 45.8% of respondents' monthly income was 0 Tk. (women 41.25% and men 4.5%) and 34.0% earned 5000-15000 Tk. (Table 2). Interestingly, among women, a large proportion (82.5%) do not have a monthly income though they serve lots of work inside and outside of the home which is regarded as unpaid work.

Table 2. Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Characteristics	Percent (%)
Religion	
Muslim	92.5
Hindu	4.5
Christian	3.0
Family Types	
Single	80.2
Joint	19.5
Extended	0.2
Educational Status	
Illiterate	15.8
1-5 Years	18.8

6-9 Years	31.0
SSC	16.8
HSC	13.0
Degree and Above	4.8
Occupational Status	
Housework	46.0
Agricultural work	28.0
Business (small or medium)	9.8
Job (govt. or private)	2.7
Students	6.2
Others	7.2
Monthly income	
No Income	45.8
< 5000	9.2
5000-15000	34.0
15000-25000	9.0
25000-35000	1.8

Source: Field Survey, 2022.

Gender Ideology of Rural People in Bangladesh

In this study, the gender ideology among rural people toward their family and societal responsibilities is presented in three separate contexts in Bangladesh.

Household Chores and Decisions

Liberal gender ideology refers to the egalitarian share of household chores and decisions with their partners in the family and society (Audette et al., 2019; Walter, 2018; Kroska, 2007). However, the study of Western society suggests that men's gender ideology has a greater impact on the division of housework than women's gender ideology (Cunningham, 2007). Our study result shows that people's gender ideology was liberal in household chores and decisions. The result indicates that most of the respondents strongly agreed with sharing household chores and decisions equally with their partner including taking care of an infant (91.8%), housekeeping and cooking (75.8%), and freedom of choice of brides and bridegrooms in taking matrimonial decisions (85.5%) [Table 3]. The earlier studies show that household chores are segregated by gender where women tend to take

responsibility for daily routine housework like cooking, rearing, and cleaning, while men do more outside work (Borra et al., 2017). The previous study by Dey et al. (2021) explored 55% of men maintained traditional gender ideology in rural Bangladesh. Our focus group results stated (32 years one man, FGD-1):

“However, household chores are so assigned to the female members of the family, especially to the housewives, but if the husbands get time after accomplishing their productive roles (e.g. working in the paddy fields or the offices, etc.), they can put their hands into household chores to assist their wives inside the household”.

Another man (43 years, FGD-1) also supports sharing of household duties by both husband and wife and stated:

“The husband and the wife both should perform household activities. These caregiving and household duties are always time-consuming. So, there is a certain need that the husband and wife both perform these roles and activities together”.

Like household chores, respondents’ views were also liberal in household decisions based on the equality of both men and women (Table 3). While talking about the decisions based on equality of household activities, especially the cost and expenditure of the family, one woman (38 years, FGD-1) uphold her opinion:

“Yes, we should have participated in the decisions of expenditures in household activities and needs. Both husband and wife have almost equal contributions to the earnings of the family so we should have equal rights in the decision-making for familial costs or expenditures too”.

Table 3. Household Chores and Decisions

Variables (Men=200, Women=200) F (%)	Agree Strongly	Agree Mildly	Disagree Mildly	Disagree Strongly	M	SD	Gender Ideology
Q1. As far as taking care of an infant is concerned, a father should perform that responsibility in the same way as a mother does.	367 (91.8)	25 (6.2)	02 (0.5)	06 (1.5)	1.12	0.45	Liberal

Q2. Like wives, husbands should also equally do domestic tasks like housekeeping, cooking, etc.	303 (75.8)	76 (19.0)	11 (2.8)	10 (2.5)	1.32	0.65	Liberal
Q3. Opinions of both girls and boys should be considered in an equal manner.	354 (88.5)	33 (8.2)	08 (2.0)	05 (1.2)	1.16		Liberal
Q4. Expenditure and all domestic decisions should be taken unvaryingly by both husband and wife.	327 (81.8)	52 (13.0)	12 (3.0)	09 (2.2)	1.25	0.62	Liberal
Q5. In matrimonial decisions, both brides and bridegrooms should have the freedom of choice.	342 (85.5)	25 (6.2)	17 (4.2)	16 (4.0)	1.26	0.72	Liberal

Source: Field Survey, 2022.

Our study results (both qualitative and quantitative) indicate that respondents' views were liberal in the context of household chores and decisions, in turn leading to hope for gender equality.

Acceptance of Male Privilege

Men's gender ideology has widely been discussed regarding women's status worldwide (Cheung & Choi, 2016; Dasgupta et al., 2018; Kim, 2017; Miller et al., 2020; Karim et al., 2017). In the structure of patriarchal ideology, men are seen to have more power and privilege than women, and in the same system, women also allow men to rule over them (Hashemi et al., 1996). Our findings show that

people's views were traditional in the context of acceptance of male privilege in rural Bangladesh. The study result indicates that people strongly agreed with the reverse items, e.g., it is indispensable for women to take permission from the head of the male member of the family to go outside of the home (81%); a woman should not make friends with any men except their father/brother/husband or except likewise relatives (58%), and a woman should not have equal rights like a man in moving outside the home (68.8%) [Table 4]. Previous studies conducted in rural Bangladesh indicated that traditional gender ideology remains where male privilege is viewed as the societal norms and values, and females are too much submissive to men (Dey et al., 2021; Karim, Habib, Arefin, et al., 2020). While conducting our focus group discussions, a woman (30 years, FGD-1) stated:

“A woman must take the permission of the male head to go outside the house. This is the rule of our society. Suppose a woman goes somewhere outside the house without taking permission from her father or husband and when her father or husband or male head comes to know he may beat or physically abuse the wife out of anger or rage or can mentally reprimand her. Moreover, women are more at risk outside the home in our society. She goes out with the permission of the male head of her family, accompanied by a male member of the family if necessary. So when a wife goes out of the house, permission must be sought from the male head of her family, especially her husband”.

A similar discussion was held in conducting FGD-2 (only men) and a man (48 years, FGD-2) claimed and other members also agreed with him:

“Men expect to take care of their wives when they come home after completing outside work and this is the tradition. Although now women are engaging in many financial activities outside of the home (the culture of Western societies has arrived in our country), that is not fair. Indeed, a woman can't move outside freely like a man. So, a woman shouldn't have equal freedom like a man to move outside”.

These results are almost similar to the previous study of Karim et al. (2017) signifying that without considering masculine issues, women's activities outside do not always secure in a male-dominated society. Our study results clearly stated that in the context of acceptance of male privilege both men and women maintained traditional gender ideology in rural Bangladesh. These results also illustrate that women accept and maintain men's privilege in a male-dominated family and society and these results are similar to the previous studies of Duflo (2012) and Zhang (2018).

Table 4. Acceptance of Male Privilege

Variables (Men=200, Women=200) F (%)	Agree Strongly	Agree Mildly	Disagree Mildly	Disagree Strongly	M	SD	Gender Ideology
Q1. Girls can never become equal to boys.*	162 (40.5)	58 (14.5)	58 (14.5)	122 (30.5)	2.35	1.28	Transitional
Q2.The importance of father's opinion should be much more important compared to that of the mother in bringing up the children.*	178 (44.5)	92 (23.0)	75 (18.8)	55 (13.8)	2.02	1.08	Transitional
Q3. A woman should not make friends with any men except their father/brother/ husband or except likewise relatives.*	232 (58.0)	69 (17.2)	40 (10.0)	59 (14.8)	1.81	1.11	Traditional
Q4. It is indispensable for women to take permission from the head of the male member of the family to go outside of the home.*	324 (81.0)	44 (11.0)	19 (4.8)	13 (3.2)	1.20	0.70	Traditional

Q5. A woman should not have equal rights like a man in moving outside the home. *	275 (68.8)	41 (10.2)	51 (12.8)	33 (8.2)	1.60	099	Traditional
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* Reverse items Source: Field Survey, 2022.

Preference for Female Privilege

Female privilege in the family and society is a great challenging job in Bangladesh (Ali and Hatta, 2012). Our study result shows that people's gender ideology was transitional to women in leadership roles (agreed mildly and disagreed mildly 26.5% and 18.5% respectively) and women in the social judiciary as judge (agreed mildly and disagreed mildly 20.5% and 16.0% respectively) in rural Bangladesh (Table 5). However, the previous study result reveals that women's position in the decision-making and policy implementation process was traditional in rural Bangladesh (Karim, Habib, Arefin, et al., 2020; Hossain, 2012). The previous studies also revealed that most of the men had traditional attitudes in rural Bangladesh and these studies mostly limited to marital violence and women's empowerment (Islam & Karim, 2012; Dey et al., 2021; Cheung & Choi, 2016; Karim & Law, 2013; Hossain, 2012; Karim et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2020; Karim, Wahab, Hossain et al., 2023).

Table 5. Preference for Female Privilege

Variables (Men=200, Women=200) F (%)	Agree Strongly	Agree Mildly	Disagree Mildly	Disagree Strongly	M	SD	Gender Ideology
Q1. In every sphere of society, women should play a leadership role.	120 (30.0)	106 (26.5)	74 (18.5)	100 (25.0)	2.38	1.16	Transitional
Q2. In local arbitration, women should be involved as judges along with men.	100 (25.0)	82 (20.5)	54 (16.0)	154 (38.5)	2.68	1.22	Transitional

Source: Field Survey, 2022.

One man (25 years, FGD-1) showed his statement against women in leadership and social judiciary:

“This is a wrong concept regarding women that they should be engaged more in social activities like leadership roles and as a judge in local Salish (judiciary). If women get involved in more leadership roles, then who will be responsible to run the household smoothly and perform the household work? Women can involve themselves in social works related activities only when there is a high need or an important perspective for their engagement such as the celebration of social occasions or affairs, community-building activities, etc”.

Some of the male respondents emphasized women’s roles in the family home. In this regard, a man claimed (45 years, FGD-2):

“Women’s responsibility to stay and work at their homes and won’t work outside the home or in the fields. There is no need for women to take part in the leadership role and rural Salish (judiciary)”.

He also alleged:

“Although women’s participation in rural Salish is enhanced, actually they are unable to handle Salish as men”.

Our focus group findings are quite similar to Hossain (2012), indicating that it is not quite acceptable for women to give a verdict as a judge in rural *Salish* bypassing the male leaders in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

Traditional gender ideology is the main challenge in rural Bangladesh (Dey et al., 2021). This study tries to explore gender ideology among rural people toward their family and societal responsibilities in Bangladesh. The findings indicate that people were traditional and transitional toward acceptance of male privilege, and preferences for female privilege respectively in rural Bangladesh. However, people were liberal toward sharing their household work and decisions equally. The current study notably identifies that people’s attitudes toward household chores and decisions have gradually transformed from traditional to liberal while prevailing literature often shows rural Bangladeshi people as a part of a patriarchal community. The findings have significant implications to rethink the gender ideology of rural people in Bangladesh.

This research findings suggest that gender awareness should be enhanced to reduce traditional gender ideology in rural Bangladesh. In so doing, there are some specific recommendations: (a) to promote liberal thinking among rural

people, community-based participatory interventions where liberally educated men and women should be engaged to educate conservative persons; (b) community encouragement program for men should be initiated to transform their traditional gender ideology in rural Bangladesh; (c) some attempts must be taken to give up male privileges as discussed above in findings and discussion section. Although the study has achieved optimum success to explore people's gender ideology toward their family and societal responsibilities in rural Bangladesh, there are also still many challenging perspectives that were not examined. A question may be raised for further study: what factors reduce traditional gender ideology among rural people in Bangladesh?

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