

Elderly Widows in Rural Bangladesh: A Study on Family Support

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Abstract: This study examines the economic, social and emotional support systems of widows aged 60 years and over living in rural Bangladesh. It aims to explore support systems, resources and impact on living arrangements. In Bangladesh, there is a lack of a comprehensive formal support system for elderly widows. Usually, the overall social and economic supports for elderly widows come from their sons, next of kin and neighbours. Most elderly widows do not have regular income support. Small scale economic support comes from the government in the form of widow and old age allowance. Study findings indicate that elderly widows receiving supports mainly from their children have the higher tendency to co-reside with them. Also, those who are not financially supported are more likely to co-reside. The family support system is however showing some signs of strain because of poverty and outmigration. This is contributing to the increasing risk for elderly widows who rely almost totally on the support of their families. This study reports on a field survey in which 150 widows aged 60 years and over were interviewed supplemented by 6 individual case studies. The sample comes from six rural villages. Data were collected by direct interviews and analysed using SPSS.

Keywords: Elderly; Widows; Support System; Co-residency; Rural, Bangladesh

Introduction

Widowed women, whether young or old require economic, social and emotional support. But, elderly widows living in rural Bangladesh are a neglected population. Widowhood is seen as a social stigma. In many societies, widowed women have limited social status and are excluded from social participation (Akhtar, 2001; Swain & Pillai, 2005). The traditional socio-cultural environment of Bangladesh discriminates against women and they face many obstacles to their participation (UNICEF, 2010). A girl after her birth is considered to be a financial burden on the family and enters lifetime dependence on others receiving limited investment in her education and health. The marriage and patriarchal social system in Bangladesh moves a woman physically from her ancestral to her husband's home (Momen, Vhuiya, & Chowdhury, 1995). Therefore, after marriage, the dependency of a woman shifts from her parents to her husband. Married women have even less economic access than unmarried women. They are also given lower social

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status and decision making power in the family. In these circumstances, the death of a husband makes a widowed woman completely dependent on children and others. A woman's life security is at stake in the absence of an economic or social support coming from family or non-family networks. In the rural context of Bangladesh where women are in general dependent, aged widows are in a vulnerable situation. The support systems for elderly widows in particular are largely under researched. Most studies consider the socio-economic condition of the elderly in general. This study sought to examine family support and its impact on family support of elderly widows.

Research Rationale

In Bangladesh, there are no formal rules for elderly care and support. The extended families are wide spread and efficient, ensuring that the elderly were adequately cared for. In the recent past, social change has adversely affected the extended family in rural Bangladesh reducing its capacity to perform collective social responsibilities. Furthermore, lack of a universal government support has led to a rising number of elderly left in the support of their family and thus escalating old age vulnerability. A study on the support systems for the elderly widows was thought appropriate in order to provide insights into the nature of existing social support systems in contemporary times and how the elderly widows cope amidst socio-cultural and economic changes. Similarly, it has enlightened the effect of support system on residence pattern. Thus, this study makes three major contributions-1)It explores the economic, social and emotional support systems of aged widowed,2) It examines the impact of support systems on the living arrangements of aged widows, and 3)It has informed policy makers to develop and implement ageing policies in Bangladesh.

Composition of Aged and Widowed Population

Bangladesh is a small country(Haque, 2011; Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics [BBS], 2009), but, it is ranked 8th in terms of population density (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2012).At present, the population of Bangladesh is 161 million(Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2012; Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2012).The older population (aged 60 years and over) constitutes 6 percent (more than 9 million) of the total population and this is expected to rise to 21 percent by 2050 when one in every five persons will be over 60 years (United Nations [UN], 2010; Roberts, 2002). Among staged women, 42 percent are widowed (Chaklader & Kabir, 2003). In the second census (1981), 90 percent of the widowed population was widows while only 10 percent were widowers. In the first census (1974), these rates were 88 percent and 12 percent respectively. The rate of widowhood differs between urban and rural areas. In urban areas, 78 percent of elderly women are widowed, whereas only 8 percent of males are widowers (Chaklader, Haque, & Kabir, 2003). Women are three times more likely to be widowed than their male counterpart and women may live 15 years as widows (Chamber, 2005; Angel , Douglas, & Anjel, 2003; Michael, Crowther, Schmid, & Allen, 2003).

Family Characteristics

Traditionally, the rural Bangladeshi family was characterized as a joint family where grandparents and their male children used to live together in the same house. The joint family system had endured generation to generation until recently. In a joint family, each member shares the domestic tasks, divides the family burden and thus creates a family safety-net. The family was the main support during times of social, economic or emotional difficulties. The Bangladesh culture has been and is still patriarchal where the man is the figure who financially supports the family. In this family system, a father or a grand-father holds the headship of the family.

The family system has however shifted over time from this traditional joint form. People today no longer prefer to live in a joint family because of social change, poverty, outmigration and the rise of a more middle class individualistic culture. The joint family has by and large been replaced by the nuclear unit consisting of husband, wife and their unmarried children. A daughter belongs to her father's house until she gets married. Following marriage, she leaves her father's house and lives in her husband's or father-in-law's house. Apart from some minor exceptions, this system is universal.

Status of Aged Widows in the Family

Most married women in Bangladesh spend a significant period of their later life as widows since the average life span for women remains longer than for men and women tend to marry older men (Rahman & Saleh, 2011; HelpAge International [HAI], 2011). In general, a woman is given the highest status in the family as a mother or a wife. When widowhood occurs, a number of socio-cultural factors constrain widows from full participation in social activities (Swain & Pillai, 2005). Traditionally, in Bangladesh, girls are brought up in a confined domestic sphere where their activities are limited. Girls are often expected to perform as docile daughters and compliant wives. This notion creates dependency among women and eventually creates potential problems if widowhood occurs (Vincent, 2003; Mannan, 2002).

Very rarely do rural older women have any formal education. The scope for formal education has been very limited for the generation who are now aged 60 years and above (Barkat, Ara, Sattar, Poddar, & Hossain, 2003). Help Age International (HelpAge International [HAI], 2011) reported nearly 80 percent of widows participating in focus groups were illiterate. Another study conducted by Majumder and Begum (Majumder & Begum, 2008) shows that the illiteracy rate among old age allowance recipients and non-recipients is 88 percent and 93 percent respectively.

A widowed woman holds her position in the family until her sons get married. She is displaced from her power and position once her daughter-in-law arrives. A widowed woman loses all control over her children once her children are separated. The situation is more vulnerable for widows who do not have alternative of support, have no surviving son, or sons are unable to support them (HelpAge International [HAI], 2014; Mannan, 2002; McNally, 2003).

Economic Aspects

Widows of all ages have higher rates of poverty than married women and widowers (Rural Poverty Portal, 2011; Uddin, Islam, Alam, & Baher, 2010; Rahman A., 1999; Barusch, 1994). Mostly, a male who is the head of a household, or other adult male members get involved in agriculture or outdoor economic activities away from home. Usually, female members in rural areas do cooking, housekeeping, child rearing, home gardening and preservation of seeds and grains (Chowdhury, 2016). They are also responsible for keeping domestic livestock and poultry. But, the substantial economic contribution of women is largely unacknowledged in terms of its economic value. Poverty concentrates in rural areas and females remain poor due to illiteracy and lack of participation in mainstream economic role. So, women in their later life become a dependent population since they previously lacked access to paid work (McNally, 2003; Parveen, 2007). With widowhood, the elderly are at risk of poverty as they usually have not worked outside the home previously. However, little has been done to support them economically when they are unable to meet their basic needs.

Living Arrangements

Traditionally in Bangladesh, older people co-reside with their adult children. The death of a spouse changes significantly existing living arrangements for women. Out-migration among younger adults and changes in parent-child relationships have also substantially impacted on co-residency of older widows in rural Bangladesh. The decline of the joint family system is a matter of concern particularly when the country is facing gradual population aging.

Living arrangements can become increasingly important as people age. For older widows, residency patterns and family relationships are central to their sense of identity and well-being (Scott, 1998). It is an important issue for aged widows not only for their financial support, but also for the informal care and protection provided typically by children and next of kin (Hotz, McGarry, & Wiemers, 2010). There is also a strong correlation between older people's health and living arrangements. Declining health and increasing disability decrease the likelihood of older adults living alone and increase the likelihood of co-residency (Himes & Ying, 2007).

Children as a Resource

The traditional joint family has been the primary source of support for elderly widows. Adult children have provided most of the financial support and overall care to their aged parents (Matthews, 1991). These intergenerational living arrangements have long been accepted as a customary and a normative duty and obligation of children in traditional Asian culture (Sung, 2007; Mason & Lee, 2002). The support from children to aged parents is not one way. Older people contribute to the family by providing assistance with child care. They also provide support by doing housework, cooking and other domestic work such as yard cleaning, managing domestic livestock and raising poultry etc. This mutual support system also influences traditional co-residency.

Parents raise their sons thinking that sons will take care of them in their later life. So, if a widowed woman has no son, she is definitely at a disadvantage. If she has unmarried daughters, she is in a more disadvantageous position. Having married or unmarried sons is an important resource for the support of aged widows.

Literature broadly shows that elderly widows of Bangladesh are a vulnerable group however support provided to them are insufficient. Socio-economic and demographic transition is affecting the provision of elderly support in general. Supporting the vulnerable elderly widows is therefore a matter of concern in Bangladesh.

Methodology

The study utilized both quantitative (survey) and qualitative (case study) approaches. The purpose of combining quantitative and qualitative approach was to corroborate quantitative findings and to better understand any unanticipated result arising from survey. The study involved-

1. An analysis of literature on widowhood and support systems in later life;
2. Structured interviews with 150 rural older widows;
3. In-depth semi-structured interviews with 6 rural older widows; and
4. Analysis and synthesis of data.

Sampling and Data Collection Procedure

The sample for this research came from six rural villages of Jhenaidah District. The study applied purposive sampling to arrive at a sample size of 150. Three Unions were selected from two Upazilas of the District. In the second stage, six villages were chosen by taking two villages from each Union. Twenty five widows age 60 years and above were selected from each village comprising a sample of 150 elderly widows. In addition, 6 extreme cases were purposively selected for intensive interviews out of the main sample. Participants were selected based on their availability. The data were collected by means of structured face-to-face interviews with both closed and open-ended questions and in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Data was collected in the current residences of older people from May to July 2008. The quantitative part of data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and the case studies were presented narrative.

Profile of the Respondents

The mean age of participants was 68 years and ages ranged from 60 to 110 years. Length of widowhood varied from 1 to 74 years with an average of 19 years. Widows in the study had an average of 5 children with an average of 2 sons and 2 daughters.

Only one respondent out of 150 had a primary education. More than 90 percent of the participants did not own a house. More than 35 percent were involved in working for their livelihood; ten percent worked in the house of others, and more than 8 percent were day-labourers.

Monthly income ranged from 100 to 2000 taka, with a mean of 287 taka for those who had a regular source of income such as an old age allowance, husband's pension or income from an agricultural farm. However, 70 percent did not have a regular source of income. More than 86 percent respondents mentioned that they needed material help from others.

Support Systems

The main objective of the study was to identify various social and economic needs of the elderly widows and explore to what extent these needs were fulfilled, and who mainly provided the supports. Three types of support systems were explored in the analysis: economic, social and emotional.

Economic Supports

Table 1 The relationships between a regular income, overall material support provider and living arrangements of elderly widow.

Overall Main Supporters	Have a Regular Source of Income, or Not	
	Yes (%)	No (%)
Total*	45(100.0)	105 (100.0)
Son	24.7	75.3
Next of Kin	43.5	56.5
Neighbour	21.4	78.6
Supported by none	36.1	63.9
	Allowance as Regular Income	
	Yes (%)	No (%)
Total**	32 (100.0)	118 (100.0)
Son	15.6	84.4
Next of Kin	39.1	60.9
Neighbour	14.3	85.7
Supported by none	25	75
	Have a Regular Source of Income, or Not	
Living Arrangement	Yes(%)	No(%)
Total***	45 (100.0)	105 (100.0)
With Married son	26.2	73.8
By Rotation with Children	16.7	83.3
With Others	42.9	57.1
Live Alone	41.2	58.8

* Note: Chi-square 4.15, p< not significant.

** Note: Chi-square 6.56, p< not significant

*** Note: Chi-square 6.67, p< not significant

Table 1 depicts the relationships between regular income support and the person who provides overall material support. Usually, the overall material supports for the elderly widows come from their sons. In more than 75 percent of the cases the elderly widows are supported by their sons when they do not have a regular income support. Less than a quarter have income support when they are supported by their son. But, the percentage of having a regular income is highest (43.5percent) among the elderly who are supported mainly by others apart from son and neighbours. This support group includes next of kin e.g., grand children, daughter, son and daughter-in-law, sibling and relatives. The ratio of receiving regular income is higher (more than 36percent) among those who are not supported in comparison to those supported by sons or neighbours. This regular income allowance is provided by the government.

The elderly widows who are supported mainly by their sons are less likely to have an income allowance. Around 15 percent of them who are supported by a son have an income allowance. The number of allowance recipients is highest when overall support comes from next to kin other than son or neighbours. Seventy five percent of the respondents reported that they were not supported and did not have an income allowance. So, findings indicate that, most of the elderly widows lack economic and other material support.

Findings also indicated that, around 26 percent of the elderly widows had a regular income and 74 percent did not have a regular income when co-residing with a married son. Elderly widows co-residing with other than children have the highest percentage of regular income (approximately 43 percent). The largest number (more than 83 percent) of elderly widows had no regular income support when co-residing by rotation. Co-residency by rotation happens when older parents have several children who support them.

Table 1.1 The relationships between living arrangement, main supporter, and type of work performed by the elderly widow.

Overall Main Supporters	Living Arrangement	
	Co-reside %	Do not Co-reside %
Total*	116 (100.0)	34 (100.0)
Son	90.9	9.1
Next of Kin	78.3	21.7
Neighbour	21.4	78.6
Supported by none	69.4	30.6
Types of Works		
Total**	32	21

Overall Main Supporters	Living Arrangement	
	Co-reside %	Do not Co-reside %
	(100.0)	(100.0)
Day labourer	73.9	26.1
Work in the house of others	60	40
Begging	80	20
Other	50	50

*Note: Chi-square 34.34, $p < .001$

**Note: Chi-square 5.76, $p < \text{not significant}$.

Support comes automatically when co-residing with the family members or next to kin. Most of the widows (around 91percent) are supported by their sons when co-residing with them. This percentage is only around 9 when they live alone. The percentage is also higher (more than 78 percent) among those who co-reside and are supported by next of kin, e.g., grand-children, daughter, son and daughter-in-law, sibling and relatives. Persons who are supported mainly by neighbours are less likely to co-reside (21 percent). By contrast, among those who are not supported, the percentage of co-residency is more than 69 percent. Statistically, this relationship is highly significant ($p < .001$). So, overall supports come from neighbours when elderly widows live alone and from son when they co-reside with them.

Results also show that, among day labourers, the percentage of co-residency is highest (about 74 percent).The second highest percentage (60 percent) is those who work as domestic servants in the house of others. Half of the elderly widows involved in other kind of work apart from day-labourers co-reside with their offspring or others. Also, 20 percent of them who earn their livelihood by begging co-reside with their children or others.

Table 2 Predicting whether Elderly widows have Regular Income or not: Logistic Regression Analysis from Demographic Characteristics, Living Arrangements and Main Supporters

Independent Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)
Demographic Characteristics								
Age	.001 (.018)	1.001	-.014 (.020)	.986	-.009 (.021)	.991	-.008 (.022)	.992
Years of Widowhood			.022* (.014)	1.022	.023* (.014)	1.023	.021 (.015)	1.021
Number of Children			-.049 (.082)	.953	.010 (.086)	1.010	.006 (.092)	.994

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
Living Arrangement “By Rotation” Omitted Category								
Coreside with Married Son					.507 (.575)	1.660	.506 (.586)	1.658
Coreside with Others					1.284* (.691)	3.612	1.074 (.754)	2.926
Live Alone					1.200** (.620)	3.320	1.418** (.696)	4.127
Main Supporter “Others” Omitted Category								
Son							-.314 (.621)	.731
Neighbours							-1.291 (.892)	.275
None							-.244 (.622)	.784
Constant	-.897		-.134		-1.471		-1.105	
-2 Log-likelihood	183.251		179.522		173.750		171.329	
R Square	.000		.025		.061		.076	
Total Number (N)	150		150		150		150	

Note: Income as dependent variable for all models

Numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

Significant level * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

Table 2 presents the results of Binary Logistic Regression predicting whether elderly widows have regular income or not with factors representing age, years of being widowed, number of children, living arrangements and main supporters. In Model 1, the coefficient of age is smaller (.001) in magnitude, but positively associated with income. But, in Model 2, after adding two new variables, i.e., years of widowhood and number of children, age shows negative effect on income with an estimate coefficient of -.014 that is statistically not significant. Number of children also affects negatively on regular income. A significant (at 10percent level) result is found in the effect of years of widowhood. Elderly women with longer widowhood are more likely to have regular income.

Turning to the effects of living arrangements in Model 3, it was found that effects of age and years of widowhood were consistent with the previous Model predicting regular income. All the dummy variables of living arrangement are positively associated with income. It is also apparent in Model 3 that widows who co-reside with others are more

likely to have regular income. This result is significant at the 10 percent level. Effect of living alone is also positive on income. Though the coefficient of living alone is smaller (1.200) in magnitude than residing with others (1.284), it is statistically stronger (significant at 5% level). Co-residing with married sons also has a positive effect on income, but the coefficient (.507) is less than co-residing with others and living alone.

The effect of the dummy variables of main supporter after controlling for living arrangement and other demographic variables in the final Model 4, are negative with having regular income. Widows who are supported mainly by their sons are less likely to have regular income. Regular income opportunity is also less among elderly widows who are mainly supported by their neighbours. Likelihood of receiving a regular income is higher for elderly widows when they are not supported by son and neighbours.

Social Supports

Nearly 87 percent of elderly widows claimed that they needed material help from others. In more than 51 percent of the cases, this support came from their sons. Around 10 percent of elderly widows were supported by their neighbours. Other than son and neighbour, around 5 percent of the elderly are supported by their daughter and only 4 percent are supported by their grand-children. Almost all of the research participants (98 percent) had one or more surviving children.

Around 70 percent of the participants identified economic uncertainty as their main problem and more than 21 percent reported health issues as their most difficult aspect of life. One third of the elderly widows living alone mentioned that their children did not want to co-reside. In 25 percent of the cases the reason for living alone was that children live far away, and in 17 percent of the cases children are poor. More than 62 percent of the respondents mentioned that they sought paid employment after their husbands died. Only 2 percent of elderly widows own a house in their name and 7 percent are part-owners. Elderly widows mostly (67 percent) consult with a non-qualified person when they are sick. Around 9 percent of them consult with a pharmacist. Less than 3 percent of the elderly widows had a chance to go to district hospital.

Emotional Supports

Participants were asked if more attention was given to them in the family and society, whom they shared with if they had a problem, whether they played a role in family decision making, if they were invited by neighbours to participate in social ceremonies, and how substantially they considered their relationships with children.

The majority of the respondents (78 percent) reported that they were given little status in the family and society, felt helpless and excluded. In 66 percent of the cases, children or others do not consult them when making family decisions. Only 5 percent of the respondents reported that their relationships with children improved after the death of a husband. Most of them (78 percent) reported that their relationships deteriorated, and 17 percent reported that their relationships with children were unchanged. Most of the elderly widows (more than 80 percent) discuss problems with family members. Almost

the same percentage reported that they shared with neighbours. Nearly 73 percent said that they were not invited by their neighbours to participate in social ceremonies. Less than one fourth of respondents mentioned that they are invited sometimes and only 25 percent reported that they were invited always with other members of the family.

The Case Studies

With a view to supplementing the survey findings and to understand better the problems and support systems of the elderly widows, six individuals were purposively selected out of the main sample for intensive study. Participants were asked to tell their stories. Stories were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim when data collection was finished.

Case 1

The first interviewee was a 71 year old woman who became a widow when she was 35 years old. She has been a widow for 36 years after being married for 26 years. She was married at the age of 8. Her husband died after prolonged suffering from cancer leaving four sons and three daughters, but no land, even an ancestral home. She said:

The death of my husband left me helpless as I sold all valuables for his treatment. I didn't know where to go as I had no land to build a dwelling house. I had to survive and feed my kids by asking others.

Now all her offspring are married and live in separate household. She gets no economic support from them. All of her children are uneducated and poor day labourers. She co-resides with her younger son who is comparatively better off.

The others of my sons are not solvent; they are also poor and live from hand to mouth. I am an extra burden to them. I co-reside with my younger son who is comparatively better off, but, also faces hardships to maintain his family.

Case 2

The second case studied was a 70 year old woman who became widow 16 years ago after living a conjugal life of 46 years.

I got married and went to my husband's place at an age when I did not have my second teeth. Eventually, I became a mother of several kids. But, the problems and miseries remained with me in my husband's house with my husband's passing away.

She started living alone soon after her only son got married. Her son is a poor day-labourer and earns barely enough money to maintain his own family. She said,

My son himself faces difficulties in maintaining his family. I beg at different doors to survive as my stomach needs food.

She receives an old age allowance provided by the government. After an interval of six months, she receives around 600 taka, though she is officially eligible for 960 taka.

Case 3

The third case was a childless woman aged 98 years. Her husband died after a marriage of 75 years. When her husband died, she stayed with her husband's brothers and their children. Her nephews supported her as she brought them up with love and affection. She mentioned:

I have no childrenI have nothing in this world except my hands and legs. My husband died suffering from disease. I have been staying with my nephew.

She is now completely dependent on her nephews who are also poor, but, the main supporter and material help provider. She never receives any support from the government.

Except me, nobody can understand the pain of being childless. My only consolation is that my nephews are now my real friends and foes. They provide me with food and clothing even though they experience hardship to maintain their family.

Case 4

A 62 year old widow started her life story by saying:

I cannot make anybody understand the pain of having no son. On the one hand, I had no son and on the other hand, my husband died at inopportune time. My life is full of anxiety and insecurity.

She has been living a widowed life for 25 years. She became widowed when she was 37 years old and she faced many problems as her daughter was young too at that time. When her husband died, she began to work in a chatal (a yard where paddy is reproduced for rice). For wages, she receives 60-70 taka per day that is totally inadequate to maintain her life.

When I work, I get only 60-70 taka. What can be done with this nominal money? It's a hard work and my health has been deteriorating working day and night. I want to take a rest now. But, Allah has not written it in my fate.

Case 5

The fifth interviewee was a 102 year-old woman who became widowed when she was 72 years old. Her husband died after they have been married for 62 years. She has four daughters but no son. She mentioned,

My husband died, I cannot remember how long it is. I was married when I was so young. I am illiterate. I have no son, but, four daughters and I reside with one of them.

Her eldest and youngest daughter moved to the neighbouring country. She has no contact with them. Her daughter's family is not well-off. She neither owns land or a home, nor receives any allowance. Sometimes, her close neighbours support her with food or clothes.

Case 6

The last interviewee was a 62 year old woman. She has been widowed for the last 35 years. Her husband passed away after 15 years of marriage when they had a younger son. The husband was a poor day labourer and left no property for them. She began working in the homes of other for her families' survival. Her sufferings were increased soon when her son got married.

My son used to live in his father-in-law's house. It is far beyond to expect a son's support when he lives in his father-in-law's house. I have no place to turn. I am in trouble living homeless.

When her son moved to his father-in-law's house, she was compelled to beg from door to door. Sometimes she also begs in the local bazaar where she gets 10-20 taka. This is her sole means of livelihood. She also asks for clothes from different people as her son never provides her clothes.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates a lack of supports provided by the family, community and state for elderly widows living in rural Bangladesh. However, it is important to mention that sons are still the main providers of support in all areas of economic and social support. In rural Bangladesh, widows are found co-residing with their sons and others in the majority of the cases which is the traditional customary norm of the country. Lack of financial support, less economic resources of children, shifts in the traditional joint family system and out-migration of offspring have affected the propensity of elderly widows to co-reside. But, co-residency has remained the first line of living arrangements. These findings are similar to the study findings of Determinants of Living Arrangements, Health Status and Abuse among Elderly Women: A Study of Rural Naogaon District, Bangladesh (Munsur, Tareque, & Rahman, 2010), but, it contrast with the situation of the West where widows were found living alone in the majority of the cases.

Other than son, overall support is associated with next to kin and neighbours. Small scale economic support comes from the government in the form of a widows and old age allowance. Study findings indicate that elderly widows receiving supports mainly from their children have a higher tendency to co-reside. But, those who are supported mainly by neighbours are less likely to co-reside with their children or others. Also, those who are not financially supported are more likely to co-reside. By contrast, widows who are mainly supported by their son are less likely to have a regular income such as an allowance. Regular income opportunity is less common among elderly widows who are mainly supported by their neighbours. This is because of an absence of a comprehensive government social and economic security program.

A large number of elderly widows have no regular income support. Some of them receive a government allowance, some work on agricultural farms and a quite few of them have their own income from raising domestic chickens etc. Many of them earn their livelihood by begging.

Poverty and outmigration is contributing to the increasing vulnerability of elderly widows who rely almost totally on the support of their families. Supports provided by next to kin and neighbours are not provided on a regular and dependable basis. So, there exists a serious gap in provision of a comprehensive economic and social safety-net. There is a need to develop policies and support systems that will assist elderly widows particularly at a time when traditional supports are being threatened.

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