

Research



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# Starting from scratch in a patrilocal society: how women build networks after marriage in rural Bangladesh

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Humans rely on both kin and non-kin social ties for a wide range of support. In patrilocal societies that practice village exogamy, women can face the challenge of building new supportive networks when they move to their husband’s village and leave many genetic kin behind. In this paper, we track how women from 10 diverse communities in rural Bangladesh build supportive networks after migrating to their husband’s village, comparing their trajectories with women who remained in their childhood village (Bengali:  $n = 317$ , Santal:  $n = 36$ , Hajong:  $n = 39$ , Mandi:  $n = 36$ ). Women who migrated for marriage started with almost no adult close kin (mean 0.1) compared to women who remained in their childhood village (mean 2.4). However, immigrants compensated for the lack of genetic kin by a combination of close affinal kin and close friends. By their late 20s, immigrants reported substantially more non-kin friends than did non-immigrants (mean 1.4 versus 1.1) and a comparable number of supportive partners in several domains. These findings raise questions about the functions and quality of these different social ties and how different composition of supportive networks may provide different opportunities for women in these settings.

This article is part of the theme issue ‘Cooperation among women: evolutionary and cross-cultural perspectives’.

## 1. Introduction

A theoretical keystone of the evolutionary social sciences has been the importance of genetic relatedness in promoting cooperation and helping among individuals [1–3]. Decades of empirical studies have also demonstrated that close genetic relatives are more likely to cooperate on collective tasks, to help each other in times of need and to share with each other [4–8]. More recently, evolutionary social scientists have recognized the importance of other social relationships that do not rely on direct genetic relatedness to promote cooperation [9–11]. These include (i) reciprocity [12,13], (ii) the cultivation of long-term ties based on mutual aid [14–16], (iii) mobilization of groups toward mutually beneficial tasks [17] and (iv) unrelated affinal kin sharing genetic interests in offspring [18,19].

For humans, opportunities for the maintenance and cultivation of these different kinds of cooperative relationships can vary quite dramatically both between and within societies. For example, a ‘lineage’ may be a culturally salient model for large-group cooperation in some societies (e.g. Lamalera whaling communities) but not others (e.g. Yanomamo horticulturalists) [17]. Within societies, different life course trajectories can shape the raw materials available for building supportive ties [20,21]. For example, individuals who leave their natal community for marriage may no longer have extensive day-to-day interactions with genetic kin [22,23], potentially depriving them of opportunities for cooperation based on genetic relatedness [24]. In such cases, individuals may need to cultivate other sources of support, including relationships with affinal kin and non-kin friends.

**Table 1.** Key characteristics of sample villages.

ethnicity	setting	religion	adults in village		% ever married living in childhood village		social network sample women
			women	men	women	men	
Bengali	rural	Muslim	81	75	18.5	97.3	63
Bengali	rural	Muslim	57	51	19.3	98.0	51
Bengali	rural	Hindu	79	82	19.0	91.5	63
Bengali	rural	Hindu/Muslim	58	62	5.2	72.6	56
Bengali	island	Muslim	44	38	9.1	57.9	37
Bengali	peri-urban	Hindu	14	19	0.0	100.0	12
Bengali	peri-urban	Hindu	41	40	7.3	72.5	35
Hajong	rural	Hindu	59	52	32.2	80.8	39
Mandi	rural	Christian	48	50	62.5	70.0	32
Santal	rural	Hindu/Christian	61	53	26.2	81.1	36

This situation is particularly common for women living in patrilocal societies that practice village exogamy. For example, in rural Bengali villages in northwest Bangladesh, more than 85% of all women move away from their village to join a household in their husband's village (see below). In such cases, after moving to their husband's village, women cannot normally rely on daily support from their close genetic kin or from friends they cultivated in their home villages. Such instances of separation from genetic kin can provide useful case studies for understanding how humans cultivate supportive networks in the absence of close genetic kin.

Recent work has shown that individuals who marry into a new village make greater use of affinal kin when genetic kin are not available [24]. Moreover, as immigrants raise children to adulthood in their new village, their close genetic kin in the village also gradually increase [22]. While this work illustrates the diverse ways that women can build networks when they move to their husband's village, they neglect another important category of social ties—non-kin friends—that can play an equally important part in daily help and cooperation [25].

To explore how women build networks from non-kin friends in addition to genetic and affinal kin, this paper focuses on 10 diverse communities in rural Bangladesh. As a point of comparison with seven strictly patrilocal Bengali communities, the paper also examines three communities (i.e. Mandi, Hajong and Santal) practicing higher levels of matrilocal residence. Focusing on these communities, the paper (i) describes the kinds and functions of supportive ties that women cultivate and maintain; (ii) examines how the number of close genetic kin, close affinal kin and non-kin friends change over their life course; (iii) compares how these trajectories differ between women who marry into new villages versus remain in their natal villages; and (iv) assesses differences in the number of supportive ties (i.e. advice, help in disputes and loans) reported by new immigrants and childhood residents.

## 2. Methods

### (a) Setting

Situated between the Himalayas and Ganges and Brahmaputra River systems, northwest Bangladesh is home to diverse cultural

groups, speaking languages ranging across Indo-European, Austro-Asiatic, Sino-Tibetan and Dravidian language families, and engaging in diverse and mixed livelihoods. We focus on communities that vary by cultural background—Bengali, Santali, Mandi and Hajong—and livelihood—farming, livestock, and rural and urban wage labour. Rural and peri-urban households are usually dispersed across rice fields, orchards, bamboo stands and ponds in nucleated clusters of neighbouring households (50–200 households) called *para* in Bangla and Hajong (*tola* in Santali and *shong* in Mandi). We refer to these settlements as villages, as they provide an important nexus for social interaction, common production activity and mutual aid [25–28].

### (b) Sample

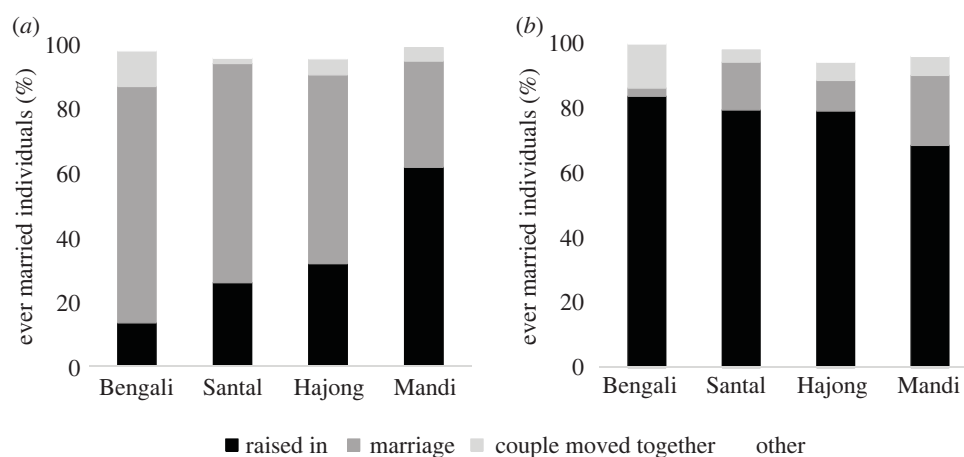
We studied 10 villages clustered into four broad cultural groupings. Seven villages were composed largely of self-identified Bengalis. These villages were differentiated in terms of religion (three predominantly Muslim and four predominantly Hindu), sources of income (four with >70% of households depending on daily wage labour) and location (four landlocked rural, two peri-urban and one based on a char [a shifting sand island] in the Brahmaputra River). However, these seven communities were all predominantly patrilocal. An additional three rural *para* were composed primarily of other ethnic groups—Mandi, Hajong and Santal. Crucially, these ethnic groups vary in the degree to which marital residence is patrilocal or matrilocal.

The full sample for identifying how individuals arrived in their village includes all consenting adults (greater than or equal to 18 years) living in each village when the household survey was conducted ( $n = 542$  women,  $n = 522$  men; table 1). The social network sample for calculating changing social networks and supportive ties includes all women: (i) for whom genealogical data was available and (ii) who were available for the social support interview ( $n = 424$  women). We also analysed a sub-sample of women who consented to a passport-sized photo to be used in the social network survey and thus had the opportunity to be nominated as a friend or support partner ( $n = 398$  women).

### (c) Measures

#### (i) Marital status

Household censuses conducted in 2017 in each village recorded the marital status of each adult in the village as single, married,



**Figure 1.** Origin of ever married women (a) and men (b). Raised in, born or raised in village; marriage, entered village by marriage.

widowed or divorced. We classified anyone who was married, widowed or divorced as 'ever married'.

### (ii) Migration status

The household census asked how long each person had lived in the village as well as their age. When they had lived in the village as long as their reported age, they were classified as 'born in the village'. When they had lived in the village for the same length of time as their parent(s) and had moved in before age 16, they were classified as 'child moved in with family'. Ever married individuals who entered at the same time as their spouse were counted as 'couple moved in together'. Ever married individuals who entered the village after age 8 years when their spouse was already in the village were classified as 'entering the village for marriage'. Finally, cases that did not fit any of these criteria were classified as 'other', which included moving to live with brother, children or maternal uncle, or moving with parents after divorce or widowhood. We then consolidated these five migration categories into four: (i) 'born or raised in village', which included 'born in village' or 'child moved in with family'; (ii) 'couple moved in together'; (iii) 'entered for marriage'; and (iv) 'other'.

### (iii) Social ties

A photograph of each consenting adult (greater than or equal to 18 years) in each village was taken and used to create a community roster for a social network study conducted in 2018 [25]. Using sheets of passport photos organized by household and household clusters (*bari*), all consenting adults were asked to identify individuals with whom they had locally meaningful ties—e.g. genetic kin relationships (*rokto shomporko*, literally 'blood tie'), affinal kin, friendships and spouse. Individuals could clearly distinguish between kin relationships that were to the best of their knowledge genetic and ascribed or affinal kin. For these analyses, we focused on (i) close genetic kin (parents, full siblings and children), (ii) close affines which include siblings or parents of one's spouse and spouses of one's children or siblings and (iii) two common kinds of friendship—'close friends' and 'visiting friends'. In a prior study, we show that all three of these classes of social ties are associated with substantially increased helping and sharing in a wide range of domains in four of the Bengali communities studied here [25].

### (iv) Support

Using the same photo sheets, we asked individuals who in the village they would (i) trust for advice in several domains (i.e. health, getting loans and saving money), (ii) seek support from during a dispute within either their household or their village and (iii) ask for monetary loans of varying amounts (500Tk,

1000Tk, 5000Tk and 10 000Tk) to cover a variety of needs and emergencies (e.g. pay back a microloan, buy food for their family and pay for a health emergency).

### (d) Analyses

We calculated how frequently women and men in each of the four cultural groups arrived in their marital residence (i.e. born or raised in village, through marriage, entered village as couple, and other), as well as the age at which they arrived in a new village by marriage (figure 1). We also calculated basic descriptive statistics on the four main kinds of ties (e.g. close genetic kin, spouses, close affinal tie and close friendship) reported by women and men and how frequently these relationships were cross-sex versus same-sex.

To compare the life course trajectory of social network composition by migration status, we plotted the changing composition of women's social networks stratified on whether they entered a novel village or remained in their home village at marriage. Finally, we tracked the average number of support partners women reported having in domains of advice, dispute support and monetary loans. Tests of the difference in average number of ties between immigrants and non-immigrants relied on a two-sample *t*-test at an  $\alpha = 0.005$ .

To examine how women were viewed by others in the community as friends and supportive partners, we used the subsample of individuals with photos ( $n = 398$ ) to track how other's in the community viewed them as friends and as support partners by age and migration status.

## 3. Results

### (a) Marriage-based migration

For those women who did not stay in their natal villages, the most common cause of migration was marriage (figure 1a). The four cultural groups differed substantially in women's post-marital residence. More than half of Mandi women (63%) but only 14% of Bengali women remained in their natal village after marriage. Notably, even though Mandi are classified as a matrilineal society, more Mandi men (70%) than women (63%) stayed in their natal village after marriage. Age of marriage-based migration also varied substantially across communities, with Mandi women having the highest average age (20.9 years), Bengali women having the lowest average age (16.5 years), and Hajong (average = 17.9 years) and Santali (average = 17.3 years) women arriving in their marital villages at intermediate ages.



**Figure 2.** Mean no. of ties by age across four categories reported by (a) women who entered a new village at marriage, and (b) women who remained in their home villages at marriage.

### (b) Functions and types of social ties

Interviews, observations and surveys from a prior study revealed a number of situations where women in these communities asked for help from others [5]. These included (i) daily tasks (household chores, childcare, and boiling, drying and husking rice), (ii) borrowing food and money for food and health emergencies, (iii) seeking advice on a range of issues including health, savings and how to get loans and (iv) seeking help in disputes within the family and with others in the para. There are several classes of social ties that women can potentially draw from when seeking support. These include close genetic kin (e.g. parents, siblings and children), spouses and affinal kin, and non-kin friendships. The two most common types of friendships are (i) friendships described as thick, close or good and (ii) friendships involving regular visits. Although members of all communities spoke Bangla, they also had idioms in their own languages for both close friends (e.g. *ghonishto bondhu* in Bangla meaning 'thick friend', and *napai gati* in Santali meaning 'good friend'), and visiting friends (e.g. *uttha boshha* in Bangla, *chalo he* in Santali) who regularly visit between households for tea, meals and gossip [25]. All of these ties are associated with substantially increased support from partners in four of the Bengali communities considered here [25].

The kind of relationship also had a substantial association with the gender composition of those relationships. Close genetic kin ties were often cross-sex for both women (all 65%; Bengali 71%; Santal 58%; Hajong 48%; Mandi 54%) and men (all 36%; Bengali 33%; Santal 41%; Hajong 46%; Mandi 48%), as were close affinal ties for both women (all 50%; Bengali 49%; Santal 46%; Hajong 54%; Mandi 47%) and men (all 75%; Bengali 78%; Santal 75%; Hajong 68%; Mandi 58%). By contrast, close friendships were rarely cross-sex for either women (all 14%; Bengali 13%; Santal 12%; Hajong 16%; Mandi 37%) or men (all 15%; Bengali 14%; Santal 6%; Hajong 24%; Mandi 25%) in all but the Mandi village.

### (c) Social ties for women who migrate for marriage versus women who remain in their childhood village

Women who migrated for marriage initially had almost no close genetic kin in their new village (figure 2a). Although

migrants do occasionally have siblings in the new village, this is rare, especially in the most patrilocal societies (8.4% of women; Bengali 6.3%; Santal 0%; Hajong 19.2%; Mandi 25%). Women partially compensate for the lack of close genetic kin with close affinal kin, and over time with genetic offspring who have grown to adulthood (figure 2a). Immigrants reported more non-kin close friends on average than did women who remained in their village after marriage (mean = 1.27 versus 0.96,  $p < 0.005$ ). They also reported a comparable number of supportive ties in most domains, with two exceptions (figure 3a). Specifically, immigrant women reported significantly more alters who could provide support during disputes within the household and who would provide small loans of 500 Tk (roughly 6 USD).

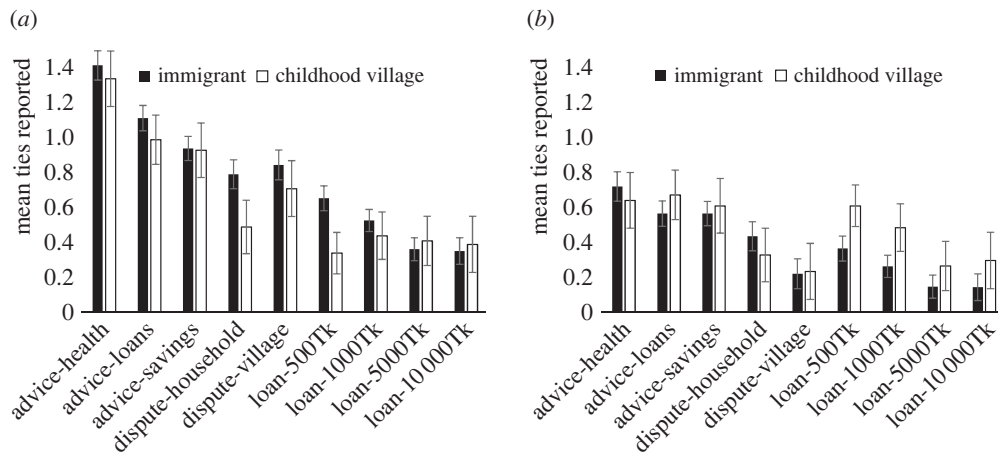
Notably, when considering how many villagers nominated women as close friends and supportive partners, these findings are roughly the same. First, immigrants were nominated as close friends more commonly than women who remained in their villages after marriage, although this was a smaller difference and was not statistically significant (mean nominations received = 1.09 versus 0.94,  $p = 0.47$ ). Second, immigrants were listed as frequently as sources of support, with one exception (figure 3b). Specifically, women who remained in their childhood village were more likely to receive nominations as sources of loans.

## 4. Discussion

Focusing on 10 diverse communities in rural Bangladesh, we found that women who migrated to their husband's village for marriage started with almost no adult close kin (mean 0.07) compared to women who remained in their childhood village (mean 2.38). However, immigrants eventually compensated for the lack of genetic kin by a combination of close affinal kin and close friends. Indeed, immigrants reported more close non-kin friends than did non-immigrants (mean 1.27 versus 0.95). Moreover, immigrant women reported as many supportive ties in a range of domains and received as many nominations as support partners from other villagers.

The rates of marital migration in these communities also illustrate how dramatically human behaviours can deviate from cultural residence norms [29]. For example, Mandi have traditionally been classified as practicing matrilineal residence,





**Figure 3.** Supportive tie nominations reported (a) and received (b) by women.

but only 63% of women remained in their village post-marriage [30]. Meanwhile, Santal have traditionally been classified as practicing patrilocal residence, and yet a substantial number of men left their natal villages for marriage [31].

Our findings about social network composition are consistent with previous work in South India that show more available affinal ties among women who marry into new villages, as well as comparable levels of support [24]. They are also consistent with prior cross-cultural work showing that immigrants through marriage have increasing genetic relatedness with others in their village as they raise their children to adulthood [22]. Our findings expand on this work by showing the additional importance of close, non-kin friends as a component of women's social networks and as a source of advice, support in disputes, and emergency loans, especially for women who migrated to a new village.

A question deserving further exploration is where these friendships come from. Do women preferentially cultivate them from neighbours, genetic kin, affinal kin or other recent immigrants? Only 12% of reported close friends were also close genetic kin, spouses or close affinal kin. That said, women may cultivate friends from more distant kin, such as cousins, grandparents, nieces, nephews, aunts and uncles, that may reside in the community. Thus, some of 'non-kin' friends considered here may have been recruited from more distant genetic kin. Future work should clarify the extent to which different factors—e.g. distant genetic or affinal kinship, spatial proximity—promote the cultivation of such non-kin friendships in village contexts with relatively little social mobility.

The current study showed that women entering new villages for marriage had very few close genetic kin to draw from. For example, only rarely did two sisters marry into the same village. However, woman may transfer to villages where they have more distant kin, for example, through cross-cousin marriage or marrying into one's mother's natal village [32,33]. In addition to providing more genetic kin, moving to one's mother's natal village could also be a mechanism to promote cross-generational inheritance of friendships (e.g. with the children of one's mother's friends). While such exchanges may help women build supportive networks in new villages, in some contexts husband's may prefer wives who are far away from their kin networks [31]. Unfortunately, our study was not designed to capture the extent of such cross-village marriage patterns. Future

work will be necessary to determine the degree to which such practices may create additional social resources for these women when they migrate to new villages.

In this study, women who migrated managed to cultivate comparably sized networks. They also reported similar numbers of supportive ties in their marital villages and were nominated as supportive partners at comparable levels to women who remained in their natal villages. However, it remains to be seen whether supportive networks with different compositions lead to different outcomes for these women, whether measured in terms of their own health and survival or the quantity, survival and health of their offspring. Moreover, the need to cultivate new networks may also impose additional stressors on immigrant women that could compromise the health and survival of themselves and their children. Future work that examines how migration status and social network composition is associated with the health and survival of women and their offspring will be an important additional step in understanding how marital residence can shape women's well-being.

Finally, a number of potential limitations deserve additional attention. First, the current analyses focus on women who stayed in their marital villages up until the current study. This potentially creates survival bias. For example, during the study years, several female participants left their marital household and returned to their parents because of conflicts in their marital village. If women who decided to leave their marital village had smaller social networks than women who stayed in their husband's village, this could artificially inflate our estimate of the size of immigrant's social networks. Similarly, if smaller social networks among immigrants are associated with greater mortality, this could produce a similar kind of survival bias. Second, we focused mainly on relationships and supportive ties within each village. We did this because our prior ethnographic work suggests that the vast majority of daily helping occurs within the village. However, future work should examine how networks extend beyond the village.

## 5. Conclusion

Recent work on women's supportive networks in the evolutionary social sciences has generally focused on genetic and affinal kin [22–24]. Our study shows that non-kin friends

can also provide a substantial component of women's close, supportive networks in rural Bangladesh, especially when women move to a new village for marriage. These findings raise important questions about the social, cultural and psychological strategies that women use to quickly build up these new networks when they have to start from scratch in a new setting. They also raise questions about the functions and quality of these different social ties, the different work required to cultivate kin-heavy versus friend-heavy networks, and how different composition of supportive networks may provide different opportunities for women in these different settings.

**Ethics.** This study was approved by Arizona State University's and LAMB's Institutional Review Boards (ASU # STUDY00005500).

**Data accessibility.** Data for the analyses presented in this article are provided in the electronic supplemental material.

The data are provided in the electronic supplementary material [34].

**Authors' contributions.** D.J.H.: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, funding acquisition, investigation, methodology, project administration, resources, software, supervision, validation, visualization, writing—original draft and writing—review and editing; S.M.: conceptualization, data curation, investigation, methodology, project administration, supervision and writing—review and editing; K.J.: conceptualization, data curation, investigation, methodology, project administration, supervision and writing—review and editing.

All authors gave final approval for publication and agreed to be held accountable for the work performed therein.

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