

AGE AT MARRIAGE AND FERTILITY PATTERN OF ADOLESCENT MARRIED WOMEN IN RURAL BANGLADESH

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Abstract

This cross sectional descriptive study was conducted in two purposively selected rural areas of Faridpur district - Alfadanga and Boalmari. The objectives were to find out the age at marriage and fertility pattern amongst the adolescent married women residing in the study areas. A total of 426 women were selected purposively and interviewed using a pre-tested structured questionnaire. Most (97.2%) were in the age group of 15-19 years, being married by 15.5 ± 1.5 years. Although 57.5% had a secondary level education, almost all (97%) were found to be housewives. Monthly income was between Taka 2001-4000 in 41.3% of the households. Regarding fertility pattern, 19% of the adolescent women were found to be pregnant at the time of survey. The total fertility rate (TFR) among this age group was estimated to be 2.6 per woman. To help improve the situation, awareness on the negative consequences of early marriage and consequent childbearing needs to be created not only among the young adolescent girls but should be targeted towards their parents too.

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Introduction

The period of adolescence which ranges between 10 to 19 years is the time of transition to adulthood¹. What happens to the individual during this period shapes how they will live their adult lives, in the reproductive arena as well as in the social and economic realm¹. In many of the developing countries including Bangladesh, marriage during adolescence continues to be a strong social norm, particularly for girls and more so in the rural areas. Almost 95% are married off before they complete their teens^{2,3}. Early female marriage is associated with a number of poor social and physical outcomes for both the young girl and her offspring⁴. Although in Bangladesh the minimum legal age of marriage is fixed at 18 and 21 years for females and males respectively, such requirements are hardly known or followed in the rural community. Among those who do know them, it has little impact on their behaviour⁵.

Early marriage is considered as a prime determinant of fertility in developing countries, given their relatively low contraceptive use. It leads to larger family sizes and rapid national population growth⁶. Because the adolescent population constitute the fertility potential cohort, their age at marriage and fertility behaviour has to be controlled effectively if national demographic goals are to be achieved on time. In view of the negative health, social and economic consequences of early marriage and early childbearing, it is also important to have a clear understanding of the marriage and fertility patterns of adolescents in order to design interventions to improve the situation. This study was designed to look into these patterns amongst the adolescent girls living in a rural setting.

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Methods and Materials

This cross sectional descriptive study was conducted in Boalmari and Alfadanga upazila of Faridpur district during the period of July 2005 to June 2006. The adolescent married girls who were residing in the study areas during the study period were considered eligible for the study. A pre-tested questionnaire was used to collect information from the respondents. Out of all the eligible couples found in the study areas, 426 adolescent girls were selected purposively.

Data were collected on socio-demographic variables including age at marriage, fertility pattern of the adolescent girls (current status of pregnancy, number of living children). Age specific fertility rate (ASFR) and total fertility rate (TFR) were estimated using standard calculations.

Results

All the respondents were aged 19 years or less. Most of them (97.2%) were in the 15-19 years age group (17.5 ± 1.39 years). Their husband's (85%) age was between 20-30 (24.01 ± 3.79) years. Almost 76% of the respondents got married within 16 (15.5 ± 1.5) years.

More than half of the respondents (57.5%) had secondary level education whereas this percentage was only 27.2% among the husbands. Almost all (97.7%) were found to be housewives. Fifty eight percent of their husbands were working as day laborers and 41% of the households had a monthly income of Taka 2001-4000 (Table 1).

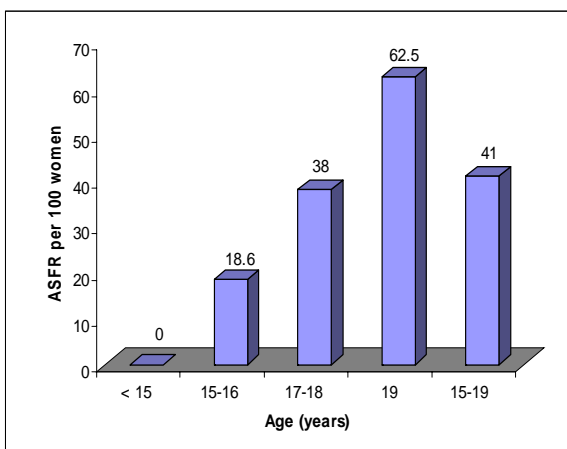


Fig-1: Age specific fertility per 100 women

Table-1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents (n=426)

Variables	No.	%
Age of the respondents (yrs)		
<15	12	2.8
≥ 15	414	97.2
Age of husband (yrs)		
<20	30	7.0
20-30	362	85.0
≥ 30	34	8.0
Respondent's age at marriage		
<12	09	2.1
13-14	101	23.7
15-16	212	49.8
17-19	104	24.4
Respondent's education		
Illiterate	37	8.7
Primary	123	28.9
Secondary	245	57.5
SSC & above	21	4.9
Husband's education		
Illiterate	102	23.9
Primary	156	37.1
Secondary	116	27.2
SSC & above	50	11.7
Respondent's occupation		
Housewife	416	97.7
Student & others	10	2.2
Husband's occupation		
Day laborer	247	58.0
Service	90	20.7
Student	74	17.4
Unemployed	15	3.5
Monthly family income (Tk)		
≤ 2000	161	37.8
2001-4000	176	41.3
> 4000	89	20.9

Nineteen percent of the adolescent women were found to be pregnant at the time of survey. Thirty five percent of them were found to have one living child while 3.5% had two living children. Fig. 1 shows the ASFRs per 100 women in the age groups 15-16, 17-18, 19 and 15-19 years which is 18.6, 38, 62.5 and 41 respectively.

Among the selected socio-demographic characteristics, husband's education was found to be significantly associated with respondent's age at marriage while respondent's education and her occupation had significant association with the number of living

children (Tables 2 and 3). The TFR of the study population was calculated to be 2.6 per woman.

Table-2: Respondents' age at marriage and demographic characteristics (n = 426)

Socio demographic variables	Respondents' age at marriage		p-value
	<18 (n=385)	≥18 (n=41)	
Respondent's education[¶]			
Illiterate	33 (8.6)	4 (9.8)	0.794
Primary	113 (29.4)	10 (24.4)	
Secondary +	239 (62.0)	27 (65.8)	
Husband's education[¶]			
Illiterate	96 (24.9)	6 (14.6)	0.025
Primary	147 (38.2)	11 (26.8)	
Secondary +	142 (36.9)	24 (58.5)	
Respondent's occupation[#]			
House-wife	376 (97.7)	40 (97.6)	0.641
Others	9 (2.3)	1 (2.4)	
Husband's occupation[¶]			
Student & services	83 (21.6)	11 (26.8)	0.439
Labour & other jobs	302 (78.4)	30 (73.2)	
Monthly family income[¶] (Tk)			
< 5000	305 (78.2)	33 (80.5)	0.849
≥ 5000	80 (21.8)	8 (19.5)	

* Figures in the parentheses denote corresponding %; # Fisher's Exact Test was used to analyse the data. ¶ Data were analysed using Chi-squared (χ^2) Test; † level of significance was 0.05.

Table-3: Respondents' fertility pattern and demographic characteristics (n = 426)

Socio demographic variables	No. of living children			p-value
	No children (n=19)	1 child (n=151)	2 children (n=15)	
Respondent's education				
Illiterate	1 (5.3)	12 (7.9)	4 (26.6)	0.041
Primary	4 (21.1)	50 (33.1)	1 (6.7)	
Secondary +	14 (73.6)	89 (59.0)	10 (66.7)	
Husband's education				
Illiterate	5 (26.3)	34 (22.5)	8 (53.3)	0.104
Primary	7 (36.8)	71 (47.0)	5 (33.3)	
Secondary +	7 (36.8)	46 (30.5)	2 (13.3)	
Respondent's occupation				
House-wife	18 (94.7)	151 (100.0)	15 (100.0)	0.012
Others	1 (5.3)	0.0	0.0	
Husband's occupation				
Student & services	13 (68.4)	112 (74.2)	13 (86.7)	0.461
Labour & other jobs	6 (31.6)	39 (25.8)	2 (13.3)	
Monthly family income (Tk)				
< 5000	14 (73.7)	122 (80.8)	12 (80.0)	0.766
≥ 5000	5 (26.3)	29 (19.2)	3 (20.0)	

Figures in the parentheses denote corresponding %; Data were analysed using Chi-squared (χ^2) Test.

Discussion

The objective of this cross sectional descriptive study was to find out the age at marriage and fertility pattern prevailing among a sample (426) of rural women.

Education up to secondary level was seen to be higher in the women (57.5% vs 27.2%) than their husbands. Bangladesh Fertility Survey (BFS) conducted in 1989, found 70% of the married adolescents to be illiterate and only 13% had seven or more years of schooling⁷. Higher education level may have a significant effect in reducing the incidence of teenage marriage.

This study revealed that although secondary level education was obtained by a good percentage of the respondents, 97.7% of them were housewives. This figure was 86% in the BFS study of 1989⁷. It indicates that employment opportunities are very limited in Bangladesh and very few women can engage themselves in any kind of income generating work.

Regarding husband's occupation, it was seen that 58.0% of them were working as day laborers whereas the percentage found in BFS 1989 was 70%. Monthly income was between Taka 2001- 4000 in 41% of the households.

This study showed that about 76% of the respondents got married within 16 years of age with a mean age of marriage being 15.5 ± 1.5 years. Data from 1989 BFS showed that 96% of marriages in Bangladesh were teenage or adolescent marriages with an average age at first marriage being only 14.8 years. Over a large number of years (1989-2006), a very slow change towards an increasing age at marriage is thus observed.

It was found that 19% adolescents were pregnant during the time of survey. Thirty five percent of the women had one living child while 3.5% had two living children. Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) 1996/97, found the percentage of females who were mothers by age 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19 to be 8.5%, 23.5%, 32.6%, 43.2% and 54.6% respectively. In that survey, the age specific fertility rate (ASFR) among the 15-19 year age group was found to be 147 per 1000 women⁸. The corresponding data found in BDHS 2004 was 142 per 1000 women⁹. These data differ from the one found in this study which was 410 per 1000 women. This may be due to the fact that the denominators used in those surveys were quite different from the one used in this study. The ASFR in the 15-19 year

age group found in Philipines, Indonesia, Pakistan and India was 50, 61, 84 and 121 respectively¹. BDHS 2004 also estimated TFR to be 3 per woman which is a little higher than the TFR of 2.6 per woman found in this study.

This study identified husband's education to be significantly associated with respondent's age at marriage while respondent's education and her occupation had significant association with the number of living children present. These findings are quite similar to those found in the 1996/97 BDHS where respondent's education, her socio economic condition, working status and husband's occupation were identified to be the important determinants of adolescent childbearing in Bangladesh⁸.

Conclusion

In this study, an attempt has been made to find out the age at marriage and the fertility pattern of adolescent married girls residing in rural areas of Bangladesh. The mean age at marriage was observed to be 15.5 ± 1.5 years which was below the minimum legal age for marriage of females. Although a trend towards increasing age at marriage is observed in this study, the rise is very slow and too little. The total fertility rate among this group was estimated to be 2.6 per woman. In order to reduce the rate of early marriage and childbearing, adolescents, their parents and communities should be made more aware of the negative health, social and economic consequences of these events. Such awareness could be created through social mobilization and information, education and communication campaigns. Opportunities for

education, empowerment in decision making and employment outside the home for young women are likely to result in delayed marriage. Another important measure could be an extension of the interval between marriage and first birth through effective use of family planning methods.

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