Marital Disruption in a Rural Area of Bangladesh

Predisposing Factors and Consequences on Women's Lives

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Cover: *In most cases, a bride in the rural culture of Bangladesh is like a doll in the hands of her husband and in-laws, with the exception that an actual doll enjoys more affection and care from its live 'little mother.'*

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

This study, carried out during the second half of 1995, investigated the predisposing factors leading to marital disruption and its consequences on women's lives in the Matlab area of rural Bangladesh. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. Data were generated from detailed case studies and quantitative surveys of a small number of maritally disrupted women. Additional data were used from the ongoing demographic surveillance system of the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh.

The findings revealed that the divorced and abandoned women and their children are extremely vulnerable, both socially and economically. Various factors were identified as having influenced marital disruption, the most important being: aspects determining the process of marriage, various family problems due to non-fulfillment of the demand for dowry, mutual distrust, extramarital relationships, quality of sexual life, education of women, and other behavioural characteristics of the individuals. Level of wife's education showed an inverse relationship with the risk of divorce. Women who did not have live-births from the first pregnancy had a higher risk of divorce. The effect of a pregnancy outcome was found to be dependent on women's level of education. Illiterate women with unsuccessful pregnancy outcomes were at the highest risk of being divorced, with the lowest risk for women with some education and a live-birth.

The women-focused development programme in the study area from BRAC, a national NGO, is helping women in this context. However, the impact of the programme needs to be monitored carefully.

Introduction

Marriage is almost universal in Bangladesh. The process of marriage is still traditional, and the bride has very little participation even in choosing her partner. The patriarchal social system compels a woman to move socially and physically from her natal home to that of the husband, which also shifts her dependence to her husband (Abdullah 1974; Chaudhury and Ahmed 1980; Ahmed and Naher 1987). The most important social status a woman gets after marriage is that of a wife and a mother (Sattar and Huq 1992). She is groomed up from her very childhood to be a 'perfect' wife and daughter-in-law. With little access to education and occupational skills, and bonded by social restrictions, she has few opportunities to be economically productive outside the four walls except to play the role of a dutiful wife and reproduce her husband's family line (Arens and Burden 1985; Choudhury and Ahmed 1980; Hartmann and Boyce, 1990). For many, marriage gets disrupted voluntarily or for others, involuntarily (RDRS 1990). Under either set of circumstances, her social and economic security suffers in the absence of any institutional support. In a society like Bangladesh, where women in general are constrained, it is obvious that the maritally disrupted ones are in worse condition; their children also suffer from the consequences (Momen *et al.*1995; Hossain and Huda 1995; Bhuiya and Chowdhury 1997).

Recently, there has been a growing concern about the need for development interventions to improve the condition of women. It has also been gradually acknowledged that a mere one-shot benefit to a target group of women would in fact not solve their multifarious problems (Khan 1992). A broader understanding of the predisposing factors that lead to such a vulnerable state and the process thereof is needed to design an effective intervention.

With this in view, the present paper focuses on marital disruption due to divorce and abandonment, the process thereof, consequences, and predisposing factors, and discusses the potential role of an integrated women development programme.

Materials and Methods

Study area and population

The study area comprised 149 villages in Matlab and Daudkandi *thana* (sub-district) situated 40-50 kilometers southeast of Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. The study villages, with a population of over 200,000, have been covered by the Demographic Surveillance System (DSS) of the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR,B) since 1966. The area is a low-lying deltaic plain intersected by the tidal river *Gumti* and its numerous tributaries. The major modes of transportation within the area are on foot, by boat, and in some cases, by small steamer or launch.

As in most other parts of rural Bangladesh, most people in Matlab are poor. Farming is their dominant occupation, except in a few villages where fishing is the main means of livelihood. Female employment is virtually nil with more than 95% engaged in household work. Nearly half of the households are economically in marginal situations, owning less than 50 decimals of land and with household members selling manual labour for more than 100 days a year for survival. Fifty percent of the males and 30 percent of the females above six years of age can read and write (BRAC-ICDDR,B, 1994).

One half of the study villages has been receiving intensive MCH-FP services since 1977 from ICDDR,B, and the other half receives government services only. In 1992, a comprehensive rural development programme was introduced by BRAC, a national non-governmental organization, in some villages with and without

MCH-FP programme of ICDDR,B. The BRAC programme targeted the poorest of the poor, especially the women. The women in the BRAC villages were organized into small groups of five, and a confederation of small groups in a village, with 20-40 women members was formed and termed as village organization (VO). The development inputs from BRAC included functional and social awareness education, human rights and legal awareness building, skill development, saving and collateral-free loans among the members. The social awareness progarmme continued to emphasize the social structure and root causes of poverty, gender relations, family laws, and women's rights issues. In weekly meetings of the members, 17 resolutions were reaffirmed. The resolutions included: avoidance of early marriage for girls, not to take or give dowry in marriages, and sending children — especially girls — to schools. Details of these activities have been reported elsewhere (BRAC-ICDDR,B 1996; Bhuiya and Chowdhury, 1995; Lovell 1992). By 1996, nearly 5,000 BRAC members had been enrolled in the study area, and most members are now engaged in income-generating activities undertaken with loans from BRAC. In addition to the BRAC development programmes, there have also been activities from the government departments such as the Bangladesh Rural Development Board. These programmes mainly included skill development training, credit, and food for work (Khan *et al.* 1996). Among the development programmes, the one implemented by BRAC has been the most comprehensive.

Data and procedures

Three sets of data were used for this paper. These were obtained from: detailed case studies of maritally disrupted women, a quantitative survey among a small number of maritally disrupted women, and the ongoing DSS of ICDDR,B.

The case study, carried out among 18 maritally disrupted women in five villages adjacent to the town of Matlab during the first quarter of 1995, documented the consequences of marital disruption in women's own as well as their children's lives, the process of marriage disruption, and the factors responsible. Details of the findings of the case studies have already been reported elsewhere (Momen *et al.* 1995). Based on the experiences of the case studies, a questionnaire was developed to collect quantitative information on the process of divorce and its predisposing factors, and the nature of vulnerability after divorce. For comparison, data were collected from maritally disrupted as well as currently married women, which included 51 divorced, 16 separated, 12 abandoned, and 126 married women aged less than 40 years at the time of the survey. For two maritally disrupted women, approximately 3 married women were randomly chosen from the same village. The sample of married and maritally disrupted women thus obtained was homogenous in terms of the year of marriage: 14% of the married and 12% of the maritally disrupted women were married within the last five years; 15% of the married and 13% of the maritally disrupted women were married within five and ten years. The survey was carried out in seven purposively selected villages around the Matlab town during the second and the third quarter of 1995. The data were collected by three locally recruited trained female interviewers.

A list of the divorced women in the study villages was obtained from the DSS records, which are updated through fortnightly house-to-house visit. A list of the abandoned and separated women was prepared in consultation with members of the field staff of ICDDR,B and BRAC residing in the villages. The list was further updated by consulting key informants from the villages. As DSS maintains records of formal divorces only, the abandoned women could not be identified through DSS.

DSS data were used for studying the socioeconomic and demographic correlates of divorce. All first marriages that took place among Muslims in the DSS area during 1980-1987 and who did not migrate out within the first six months of marriage were included in this study. 85% of the total inhabitants are Muslims, and the rest are Hindus. Divorce is very rare among the Hindus in this society. The couples were linked in a mainframe computer with records of deaths, out-migration, divorce, and birth, to create a longitudinal event history of the couples with date of death and out-migration, date of divorce, and date and result of pregnancy termination. In addition, various sociodemographic information was obtained from other relevant files of DSS.

The DSS data collection procedures involved regular fortnightly visit to the households to collect information on birth, death, marriage and divorce, and migration, by a team of 110 female workers. The system involved strict supervision of field work and has been known for generating quality demographic data in a developing country situation. A detailed description of DSS is available elsewhere (Cholera Research Laboratory, 1978; D'Souza, 1984).

Variables

The small-scale survey included information on the socioeconomic characteristics of the brides' and grooms' and partners' families at the time of marriage, process of marriage, geographical proximity of brides' and grooms' households, biological and physical characteristics of the partners, deviant behaviour and religiosity of the grooms, quality of family and reproductive life after marriage, process of marital disruption, knowledge of, attitude toward, and participation in the development programmes, and consequences of marital disruption.

The socioeconomic characteristics included education of bride and groom measured by years of schooling completed. Information on comparative social status of the brides' and grooms' families before marriage was asked from the bride. Geographical proximity of the parents' house was assessed by asking whether both the families were from the same village, same union (lower most administrative unit), same *thana*, or outside.

The biological and physical characteristics of the spouses included skin complexion of the brides, physical structure, and comparative height of the spouses. Deviant behaviour included such habits as gambling and addiction of the groom to substances. Exposure to cultural life of the groom was assessed by the habit of watching theatre and drama. Religiosity was assessed by regularity in performing prayers.

The issues on the process of marriage included investigation of each other's family before marriage, initiator of the marriage proposal, seeing each other before marriage, and consent in marriage by bride and groom. The indicators on the process of marriage also included issues, such as the amount of dowry, registration of marriage, and the amount of *mohorana/kabin* (contract money) for the marriage.

The indicators on the quality of family life included the level of acceptance of the respondent by the father- and mother-in-law and husband, frequency of scolding by the in-laws and husband, frequency of physical abuse by the husband. This also included information on place of stay during sickness of the respondent: had she been sent to her parents' house? The quality of sexual life was assessed by the partners' response to each other's sexual desire, opinion about sexual satisfaction and experience of any physical discomfort during sexual intercourse. The process of divorce included data on conflict of the respondent with in-laws and

husband with reasons for such conflicts and how long after marriage such conflicts began.

The consequences of marital disruption were assessed by living arrangements after marital disruption, source of family support, family maintenance support from husband, and other problems faced by the respondent.

The study of correlates of divorce included the outcome of the first pregnancy, education of the woman, age of husband and wife, and age difference between spouses at the time of marriage. Pregnancy outcome was categorized into: (1) live-births and (2) miscarriage/abortion, and still-birth. Education of women was measured by years of schooling completed in secular schools. Years of schooling was categorized into three groups: no schooling, 1-5 years, and 6 or more years. Age of wife at the time of marriage was divided into four categories: less than 16 years, 16-17 years, 18-19 years, and 20 years or more. Age of husband at the time of marriage was similarly categorized into: less than 20 years, 20-24 years, 25-29 years, and 30 years or more. Age difference at the time of marriage was categorized into: wife younger than husband by 4 years, wife younger by 5 to 9 years, and wife younger by 10 or more years. A small number of women who were older than their husbands were included in the first category. For multivariate analysis, the categorized independent variables were coded, following the deviation/effect coding scheme (Forthofer and Lehren, 1981).

Methods of analysis

The data obtained from the in-depth interviews were summarized to highlight the process of divorce, nature of problems faced by women after divorce and coping strategies adopted in facing the disaster. Descriptive analytical techniques were used for examining the data from the qualitative survey.

A stepwise proportional hazard analysis was carried out to examine the relationship between risk of divorce and the independent variables. An examination of the impact of education of women in modifying the effect of demographic factors was made by including two-way interaction terms in the model. For ease in interpretation, a new variable created by combining the two variables having statistically significant interaction was included in the model.

Results

Process of marriage

It revealed from the case studies that the marriages of maritally disrupted women were arranged hurriedly, bypassing the usual practice of getting to know the antecedents of the groom and his family before the marriage. The demand for dowry by the groom or his family had been the dominating factor in deciding a marriage. Guardians asked for less information about the groom if less or no dowry was involved. In most cases, the bride was not or barely consulted in the process of taking decision about the marriage.

The survey data support the above findings (Table 1). Collection of information by both groom's and bride's party about each other was more common among the married cases than the divorced and the abandoned women (71% versus 46%). A similar pattern was also observed in case of seeing of the bride and groom by the guardians of partners before deciding about the marriage, a usual practice in the process of marriage (Table 1). The proportion of marriages in which the guardians of both parties had seen the marriage partners was larger (81.7%) among the currently married cases than the divorced and abandoned cases (63.3%).

With regard to the consent of the bride and the groom in the marriage, the proportion of marriages with no consent of the brides was twice among the abandoned and divorced cases than that of the currently married cases. This implied that the marriages in which the bride had consented were twice as likely not to end in divorce or abandonment than those without the consent of the bride. The marriages in which the grooms were informed by their guardians about the marriage without specifically asking their approval had a lower chance of experiencing divorce or

abandonment. However, the marriages that were decided by the grooms alone were twice as likely to end in divorce or abandonment.

The registration of marriage with the government marriage registrar did not show any relationship with the outcome of marriages. The proportion of the currently married and abandoned or divorced cases was similar in the two groups. The relationship between cash given to groom for the marriage and the chance of divorce or abandonment was not statistically significant. However, the gift in kind was found to be significantly related statistically. The proportion of marriages where materials were given to grooms was higher among the currently married cases than those of the divorced and abandoned cases. The similarity between the economic condition of the brides' and grooms' families did not show statistically significant relationship with marital stability (Table 2).

Family problems

The case studies also revealed some patterns of the contexts in which the disruption of the marriages took place. The contexts were: second marriage by the husband, failure to produce children, non-fulfillment of the claim for dowries, and physical abuse by the husband and in-laws, creating an environment in which the bride's side requested a divorce. There were incidences of sexual advances to the bride by family members other than husband and eventually these led to divorce. In some cases, an unfavourable environment was created by the husband, compelling the wife or her guardian to seek a divorce. Divorce, in most cases, had been initiated by the husbands directly. Abandonment was a matter of male whim or power without any accountability to anybody.

The survey data also identified several important factors in relation to marriage disruption. They were husband's distrust on wife,

Table 1. Distribution of currently married and maritally disrupted cases by indicators related to the process of marriage

Indicator	Married cases (%) (n=126)	Disrupted cases (%) (n=79)	Statistical significance
Antecedents			
Collected by both sides	70.6	45.6	p=.000
Collected by one side	29.4	54.4	
Seeing of partners			
Guardians of both side had seen	81.7	63.3	p=.012
Guardian of one side had seen	10.3	19.0	
None had seen	8.0	17.7	
Consent of the bride in marriage			
Yes	78.4	62.4	p=.020
No	12.0	25.3	
No reply	9.6	12.7	
Consent of the groom in marriage			
Asked/informed him	60.4	35.5	p=.000
Himself decided	23.8	50.6	
Not known	15.8	13.9	
Registration of marriage			
Yes	70.9	67.1	p=.700
No	29.1	32.9	
Cash given to the groom			
Yes	51.6	41.8	p=.220
No	48.4	68.2	
Materials given to groom			
Yes	50.8	31.6	p=.010
No	49.2	68.4	

extramarital relation of husband, claim for dowry by the bride or bride's family, and other problems between .the wife's and husband's family. It was observed that the problems confined .exclusively between husband and wife were not always responsible for marriage disruption. In most cases, external factors played a role. The proportion of marriages with husband's distrust on wife with influence from other family members was eight times among the disrupted cases than the currently married ones. A similar relationship between husband's extramarital affairs and marriage

Table 2. Distribution of currently married and maritally disrupted cases by socioeconomic characteristics

Socioeconomic characteristic	Married cases (%) (n=126)	Disrupted cases (%) (n=79)	Statistical significance
Comparative social and economic status of parents' family			
Groom's natal home was better	50.0	41.3	p=.500
Bride's natal home was better	31.7	36.0	
Both were equal	18.3	22.7	
Groom's father's education			
None	60.6	74.1	p=.050
Some	39.4	25.9	
Bride's father's education			
None	48.0	55.1	p=.330
Some	52.0	44.9	
Education of bride			
None	60.3	68.4	p=.310
Some	39.7	31.6	
Education of groom			
None	42.1	44.9	p=.860
Some	57.9	55.1	

disruption was also observed. The claim for dowry by the grooms or their families also played a statistically significant role in marriage disruption. The disputes between the families of the groom and bride due to factors other than dowry also played a significant role in marital stability. The results are presented in Table 3.

Biological and behavioural factors

Among the biological factors, neither the complexion of wives, nor their height relative to husbands' were found to be statistically significantly related to marriage breakdown. However, the religious practices of the respondents or their husbands, and gambling and addiction of husbands to substance use did show statistically significant relationship with marriage disruption. Husbands' habit of gambling and addiction to substances was found to increase the chance of marriage breakdown. On the other hand, the religiosity

Table 3. Distribution of currently married and maritally disrupted cases by factors related to family problems

Factor	Married cases(%) (n=126)	Disrupted cases (%) (n=79)	Statistical significance
Problem with husband			
Yes	60.3	68.4	p=0.31
No	39.7	31.6	
Husband's distrust of wife			
Yes	2.4	17.7	p=0.00
No	97.6	82.3	
Extramarital relation of husband			
Yes	5.6	43.0	p=0.00
No	94.4	57.0	
Problem with dowry			
Yes	19.8	35.4	p=0.02
No	80.2	64.6	
Problems between bride's and groom's family			
Yes	10.3	43.2	p=0.00
No	89.7	56.8	

was found to reduce the chance of marriage breakdown. The above results, based on the survey, are presented in Table 4.

Quality of sexual life

Table 5 presents the distribution of the currently married and maritally disrupted women by various indicators of the quality of sexual life. It can be seen that 88% of the currently married women responded positively most of the time to their husbands' desire for sexual intercourse. This proportion was 74% among the maritally disrupted women. On the other hand, 67% of the currently married women and 77% of the currently divorced and abandoned women reportedly never expressed sexual desire to their husbands. In case of those who did, 58% of the husbands of currently married women and 50% of the husbands of maritally disrupted women responded positively most of the time. Wives' satisfaction in sexual life with their husband did not show any significant statistical relationship with marriage disruption.

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Aftermath of marriage disruption

The case study revealed that, after marriage disruption, most women returned to their natal homes, and became dependent on their parents. Of them, some lived with their parents and others lived separately with the help of their parents.

The most common problem they faced after marital disruption was their financial inability to support themselves and their children for they did not have any regular source of income. Some also felt constrained as single women to take any initiatives for their betterment under the prevailing social conditions. As single women, they lacked a male guardian, which turned out to be an important constraint. Maritally disrupted women with grown-up daughters felt insecurity as they faced undue pressure from some

Table 4. Distribution of currently married and maritally disrupted cases by biological and behavioural factors of bride and groom

Factor	Married cases (%) (n=126)	Disrupted cases (%) (n=79)	Statistical significance
Complexion of bride			
Fair	41.3	36.7	p=.61
Not fair	58.7	63.3	
Comparative height of bride and groom			
Either similar or wife taller	24.8	16.5	p=.23
Wife shorter	75.2	83.5	
Groom's habit of gambling			
Yes	8.8	29.1	p=.000
No	91.2	70.9	
Substance (marijuana, locally made wine) abuse			
Yes	11.9	29.9	p=.000
No	88.1	70.1	
Religious practices of bride			
Regular	50.0	29.1	p=.005
Not regular	50.0	70.9	
Religious practices of groom			
Regular	31.0	12.7	p=.005
Not regular	69.0	87.3	

members of the society for arranging their daughters' early marriage and for restricting their movement in the village. Even if they wanted to arrange marriage for their daughters, it was not so easy as it required dowry.

The respondents of the case study did not see much prospects of their remarriage due to the general reluctance of men to marry a divorced or abandoned woman. Moreover, the demand for dowry is much higher for such women. The prospect of remarriage is more bleak among the abandoned because it cannot take place without a legal divorce.

Be it a divorce or an abandonment, the due maintenance support from the husband was universally absent. The women were almost always deprived of their due right in deciding about their marriage. Their voice was also unheard about the oppression they had gone within the marriage. Claim for support by women after their broken marriage was an exception rather than rule. There was no effective social and institutional support to help the women get their due share from the broken marriage. Some of the divorces in the present case study were processed through the *shalish* (social court) but the question of paying back *mohrona/kabin* (contract money) never arose. There were *shalish*es when the husbands wanted to remarry but a mere statement from him that he was ready to provide for all his wives gave him the required social sanction. Thus, remarriage was socially allowed although it caused divorce.

Risk of divorce

Life-table analysis of marriage and divorce revealed that 87% of the marriages survived at the end of the ninth year. The change in the cumulative survival curve was somewhat steeper during the first four years of marriage than it was afterward. The hazard rates of marriage dissolution also showed a similar pattern with an

Table 5. Distribution of currently married and maritally disrupted women by quality of sexual life

Indicator	Married cases (%)	Disrupted cases (%)	Statistical significance
Wife's response to husband's sexual desire			
Positively most of the time	88.0	74.0	p=.019
Not positively most of the time	12.0	26.0	
No. of respondents*	125	73	
Husband's response to wife's sexual desire			
Positively most of the time	57.5	50.0	p=.433
Not positively most of the time	42.5	50.0	
No. of respondents*	40	14	
Sexual satisfaction of wife with husband			
Most of the time satisfied	89.3	85.5	p=.601
Most of the time not satisfied	10.7	14.5	
No. of respondents	126	62	

Who expressed sexual desire

exception after eight years when the hazard rate was somewhat higher than that in the preceding two years.

Correlates of divorce

The results of hazard analysis of correlates of risk of divorce with main and interaction effects are presented in Table 6. Among the variables included in the hazard analysis, results of the first pregnancy, education of women, age at marriage of women, and age difference between the spouses were found to have statistically significant relationship with the risk of divorce (Table 6). Age of husband at the time of marriage did not show any statistically significant relationship with the risk of divorce.

Risk of divorce was found to be influenced by the first pregnancy outcome. It revealed that women whose first pregnancy resulted in an abortion or a miscarriage or a still-birth, were twice as likely to experience a divorce subsequently compared to those who gave a live-birth.

Education of women was found to have a negative relationship with the risk of divorce. Women with no education experienced the highest risk of divorce, and those with more than five years of schooling had the lowest risk. In relative sense, the odds of divorce were 2.6 times among women without any schooling than those who had six or more years of schooling.

Age difference between the spouses was found to be curvilinearly related with the risk of divorce. The lowest risk of divorce was experienced by women younger than their husbands by 5-9 years, followed by women younger by less than 5 years. The highest risk was experienced by the women 10 or more years younger than their husbands. In a relative sense, the odds of divorce were 15 percent and 49 percent higher among women who were younger than their husbands by 4 and 10 or more years respectively than those who were 5-9 years younger.

Figure: Survival of marriage by education and pregnancy outcome

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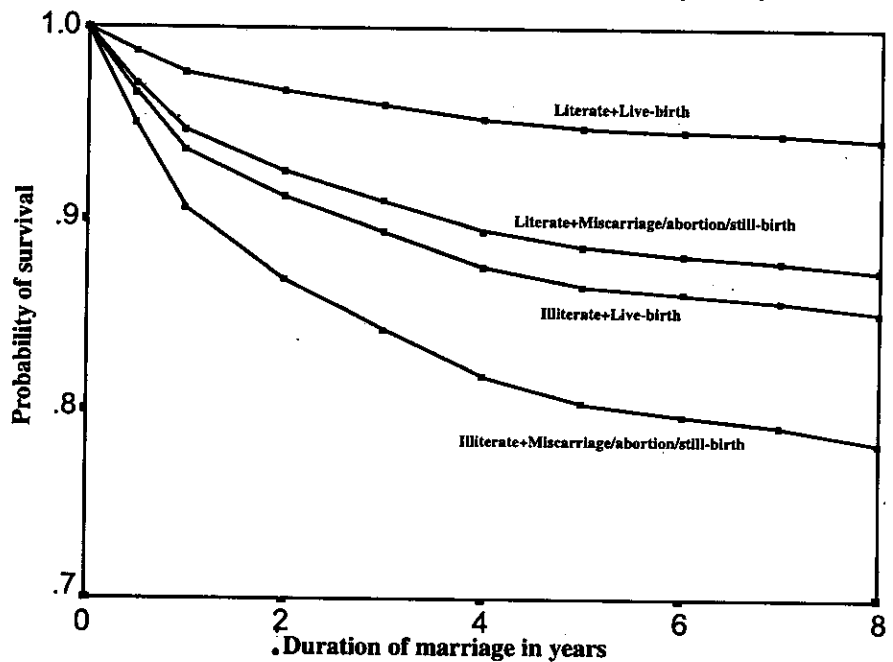
In relation to age at marriage of women, those who married before 16 years of age had the highest risk of divorce. The lowest risk was observed among the women who married at the age of 16-17 years.

Table 6. Results of hazard analysis of correlates of divorce

Independent variable	No. of women	Model I $\beta_\bullet$	Model I Odds ratio	Model II $\beta_\bullet$	Model II Odds ratio
Result of first pregnancy		$\chi^2=58.05$***			
Live-birth	7376	-.34	RC		
Miscarriage/abortion and still-birth	975	.34	1.97		
Education of women (years)		$\chi^2=61.71$***		-	
0	6066	0.54	2.59		
1-5	1605	-0.13	1.32		
6+	680	-0.41	RC		
Age difference at marriage (years)		$\chi^2=21.03$***		$\chi^2=20.77$***	
Wife younger than husband by 4 years	2425	-0.04	1.15	-0.04	1.15
Wife younger than husband by 5 to 9 years	3966	-0.18	RC	-0.18	RC
Wife younger than husband by 10 years or more	1960	0.22	1.49	0.22	1.49
Age of wife at the time of marriage (years)		$\chi^2=8.24$*		$\chi^2=8.53$*	
<16	1169	0.18	1.34	0.18	1.34
16-17	2922	-0.11	RC	-0.11	RC
18-19	2636	-0.01	1.11	-0.01	1.11
20+	1624	-0.06	1.05	-0.06	1.05
Education of women and result of first pregnancy		-		$\chi^2=113.96$***	
No education and miscarriage /abortion/still-birth				0.61	4.18
No education and live-birth				0.19	2.75
Some education and miscarriage/abortion/still-birth				0.02	2.32
Some education and live-birth				-0.82	RC
Model χ^2, 7 d.f.		155.41***		$\chi^2=113.96$***	

* $p<.05$; ** $p<.01$; *** $p<.001$

Age at marriage of the husband did not show any statistically significant relationship with the risk of divorce.

The above relationships between the risk of divorce and age at marriage and age difference between spouses were found not to be modified by the level of education the women had. However, the risk of divorce associated with unsuccessful pregnancy outcome was dependent on the level of education of the wives or vice versa. The highest risk was observed by the women without any schooling and who had an unsuccessful pregnancy outcome. This group was followed by the women with no schooling and who had a live-birth, women with some schooling with miscarriage/abortion and still-birth, and women with some schooling and live-birth. The odds of divorce among the women with no education and a miscarriage/abortion/still birth were as high as 4.2 times more than those with some schooling and a live-birth (Table 6).

Discussion

The results of the study clearly indicate that the divorced and abandoned women and their children are extremely vulnerable, both socially and economically, in rural Bangladesh. The factors responsible for divorce varied from the process of marriage to the quality of sexual life and other individual characteristics. After marriage disruption, in most cases they had to return to their natal home and become dependent on the members of natal family. The due share of the women from the broken marriage, such as contract money and maintenance support for themselves and their children, could hardly be realized in the absence of any effective institutional support. Both woman and her children are looked down upon by the members of the community. Quite often women were divorced or abandoned for reasons beyond their control.

Theoretically speaking, the stability of a marital relation should depend on the quality of relationship between the spouses which may be determined by their compatibility and the level of understanding. As most of the marriages in rural Bangladesh are arranged by guardians, development of relationship and understanding between the spouses is a post-marriage matter. In a living environment where the wife joins the husband in his family with other in-laws, husband and wife hardly get any time to spend together without interference from other family members. Thus, it is imaginable that the development of a deeper mutual understanding may take a long time, if this gets a chance at all. So, it is quite expected that the divorce rate is highest during the first few years of marriage.

If one examines the case study and the survey results carefully, it can be seen that among the most proximate determinants of marriage disruption, some were related to

individual characteristics of the husband and wife and some to the households of husband and wife. Some, on the other hand, are the outcome of the overall position of women in society. Factors such as habit of gambling and substance abuse by the husband may symbolize inadequate attention to the family life and may also cause abuse to other family members, especially to wives. If it is a joint family, it is not unlikely that the in-laws blame the wife for not being able to refrain her husband from gambling. Both gambling and addiction may also lead to pressure on the wife to bring money from her natal home to maintain his bad habits. Such demands can be continuous, are bound to remain unfulfilled, and can create a strenuous relation between husband and wife and their families. This can eventually lead to a divorce or an abandonment. An extramarital relation of the husband is also something that results in negligence of the wife and affects the relationship. This may also result in a second marriage, putting the first marriage in jeopardy and which may eventually end in divorce.

Husband's distrust on his wife, which was found to affect the stability of marriage, may be of a varied nature. This may include distrust with household resources and also fidelity. Quite often this is instigated by other family members, on which the wife has hardly any control. The above factors, especially the fidelity, may be less common among men and women who adhere more to religious practices than those who do not. Thus, there is a lower proportion of men and women in the maritally disrupted group who complied with religious practices.

Marital stability can also be a function of the wife's ability to fulfill the expectations of the husband or other household members. Production of children can be one such expectation. Thus, the wife can solely be held responsible for not being able to give a live-birth, and this may result in divorce. In fact, the relationship of poor pregnancy outcome and divorce may also be circular. Poor

quality of family life may also induce poor pregnancy outcome which can, in turn, cause divorce. In the above context, a review of the process of marriage, family life, and divorce in the study area can be of help. Marriage in rural Bangladesh is almost always arranged by parents and/or guardians. The groom's party always has the upper hand in negotiation of dowry and the bride price (*kabin/mohorana*). The bride comes to a new environment and has to struggle to adjust to it. The other members in the household tend to shift the work burden on her and wait to evaluate her performance and to make judgments as to her suitability as an in-law. Quite often the workload, accompanied with a lack of support and authority, becomes physically and emotionally unbearable, resulting in failure to fulfill the expectations of the husband and/or household members. At this point a conflict starts, and for some it is the beginning of the process of divorce. It is most likely that the crisis continues and becomes intense, involving extreme psychological pressure and physical violence on her as time progresses (Roy 1994). In the meantime, if she becomes pregnant, it can interfere with her physical capacity to perform the household work, resulting in more assaults and eventually ending her pregnancy in a miscarriage, abortion, or still-birth. At times, this may also be termed as her gross failure to produce a child and may accelerate the process of divorce. Thus, the poor pregnancy outcome and the quality of family life can work circularly and synergistically to cause a divorce.

Whatever the reason for marriage disruption, it is true that in most cases the consequences are undesirable. Although this paper throws some light on the situation, the concern remains how one can reduce the chance of marriage disruption and minimize its consequences. A stable marriage in a country like Bangladesh is an outcome of fulfillment of expectations and compatibility between the partners as well as the partners' family. The wife is indeed in

the most difficult position. She is the one to make everybody happy. Thus, her ability to maneuver the situation is of prime importance. A natural question is: what can equip her to avoid divorce, or in case it happens, how can she cope afterward?

In this scenario, the physical and psychological maturity of the wife can play an important role. The physical maturity can help her cope with the husband's biological demand, ability to have a successful pregnancy, and to cope with the heavy load of household work. It is likely that the older the wife is at the time of marriage, the more likely she is to be physically ready to shoulder the responsibility to fulfill the expectations. Thus, the higher the age at marriage the lower the risk of divorce.

The chronological age in most cases also leads to higher psychological maturity of wife. However, exposure to education can contribute to increasing her capacity to maneuver the marriage situation in her favour. Education also helps a wife to have better status within the family. The educated women are also likely to be better-nourished and biologically superior to the uneducated ones (Bhuiya and Mostafa 1993). Thus, it is expected that the chances of divorce among educated women are lower than among the uneducated ones. It is also likely that education can indeed help a woman fight for her due claim from the marriage after divorce and in some cases can also help find an occupation for making her living.

The fact that women are now participating in the development programmes available in the study area (especially of BRAC), is likely to bring about a positive impact in reducing vulnerability of the economically disadvantaged women due to marital disruption. The development programmes as that of BRAC can help women at least in two accounts in the context of marital disruption. In general, it can raise women's status in society and

ensure their role in marriage decisions. Income generated through their participation in the development programmes can make them an asset to the family rather than a burden. In case of any eventuality, the income-generating programme can also ensure a reasonable income for her maintenance. BRAC's legal education can also equip them to claim their due share from a broken marriage. It is unclear how far the resolutions against dowry will reduce its prevalence. Even BRAC-member women, while informally discussing the use of their savings from BRAC-assisted projects, mentioned that one of the possible uses would be dowry for their son-in-law. The development interventions like that of BRAC have explicit goals to empower women and to reduce their vulnerability; nevertheless, their impact should be monitored, and necessary modifications should be brought about in the programme to make it more effective.

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The **Public Health Sciences Division (PHSD)**, with staff comprising public health professionals, epidemiologists, social scientists, and economists, focuses on the evaluation of population-based interventions to improve child health, reproductive and sexual health, and public health programmes. Research includes: reproductive health; high-risk sexual behavioural patterns; family planning; safe motherhood; child health at the community level; epidemiological patterns and transmission of infectious diseases (especially diarrhoeal, acute respiratory and nutrition-related illnesses); healthcare delivery services; illness prevention, behaviour modification; and vaccine trials. The Division has the responsibility of conducting field studies at Matlab involving 210,000 people under the Demographic Surveillance System (DSS).

The **Director's Division** provides support to the scientific divisions. As part of an infrastructural reorganization of the Centre, the Director's Division was newly created through merger of the Administration and Personnel Division, the Finance Division, and all offices under the Director's Bureau (External Relations and Institutional Development Office, Training and Education Department, Dissemination and Information Services Centre, Audiovisual Department).

What is the Centre's Plan for the Future?

In the 38 years of its existence, ICDDR,B has evolved into a research centre whose scientists have wide-ranging expertise. Future research will be directed toward development of cost-effective and sustainable solutions to the health and population problems of the most disadvantaged people in the world. The Centre's Strategic Plan: "To The Year 2000" outlines work in the following key areas:

Child Survival: Priority areas for research in child survival include: improvement of the case management of diarrhoea; acute respiratory infections; determination of risk factors for low birth rate and potential interventions; nutritional deficiency (including micronutrients); immunization-preventable infectious diseases; and strategies for prevention, including modifications in personal and domestic hygiene behaviours, provision of appropriate water supply to and sanitation for the households, and the development of effective vaccines

Population and Reproductive Health: The Centre played a key role in conducting pioneering research in the areas of population and family planning. Contraceptive use rate among women of reproductive age in Bangladesh has raised to almost 45% through its technical assistance and operations research. The 1994 Cairo Conference hailed Bangladesh as a family planning success story, using Matlab as the model for MCH-FP programmes throughout the world. The Centre continues its research in maternal health and safe motherhood and has initiated community-based research on reproductive health and STD/RTI/HIV infections.

Application and Policy: The Centre recognizes and gives a high priority to the need to transform research findings into actions by replicating the successful interventions piloted in its projects and through its research and training activities. The Centre will increase its communication, dissemination and training in its efforts to influence international and national health policies in the areas of its expertise.

New Initiatives and Approaches to Research: As a means of addressing the new initiatives in child survival and population and health research and structuring our existing programmes into Centrewide initiatives, interdivisional scientific research work and training courses have been proposed. The key areas include: Nutrition; Emerging and Re-emerging Infectious Diseases; Integrated Management of Childhood Illnesses; Vaccine Evaluation; and Reproductive Health. The interdivisional research themes will be multidisciplinary with scientists from each of the four scientific divisions engaged in formulating strategies and workplans, developing research protocols, and conducting clinical, laboratory-, hospital, and community-based trials. Outputs will include research findings, policy development and training capacity that will be used nationally and internationally and can be applied regionally and globally.

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