

Understanding the Context and Needs Related to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) among Newlywed Couples: A Cohort Study in Selected Rural and Urban Areas of Bangladesh

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Background

- Newlywed couples, often face unanswered questions or misconceptions about contraception, pregnancy, childbirth, and sexual expectations^[1].
- The transition from singlehood to marriage holds emotional, cognitive, social, legal, economic, and sometimes parenting challenges for young couples^[2].
- The early years of marriage are often the most difficult, as partners adjust to new roles and responsibilities^[3].
- Marital satisfaction and adaptation during these early years influence key health outcomes such as mental health and the risk of unintended pregnancies^[4].
- Early preventive and promotive interventions, like premarital SRH educational programmes, can help reduce cumulative risks^[5].

Objective

To understand relevant socio-cultural context and needs related to SRHR of newlywed couples in selected rural areas and urban informal settlements of Bangladesh.

Methods

Study design

Explanatory mixed-methods prospective cohort study

Study sites

Four Health and Demographic Surveillance Systems (HDSS) areas of icddr,b:

Rural: Matlab of Chandpur and Chakaria of Cox's Bazar District

Urban: Korail and Mirpur Slums of Dhaka City

Inclusion criteria

- First-time married for six months or less at the time of enrolment
- Residents of the study areas for at least six months
- Hold unique identification numbers provided by the respective HDSS

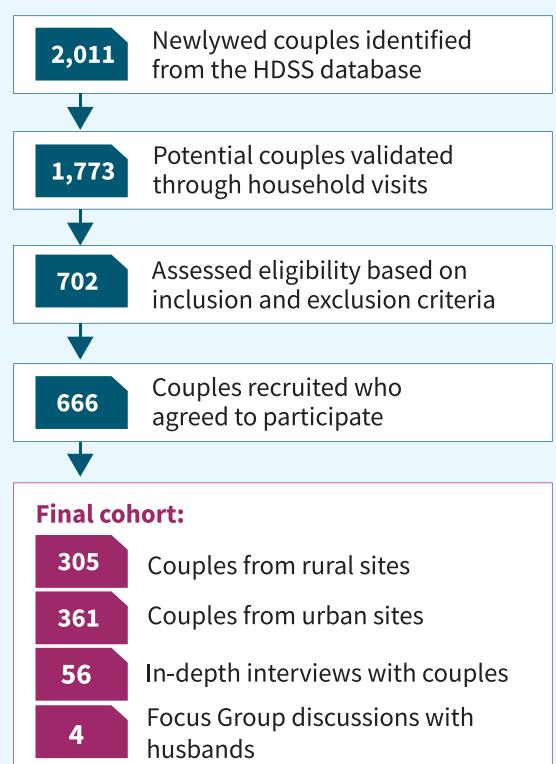
Exclusion criteria

Any history of pregnancy within the first six months of marriage

Data collection

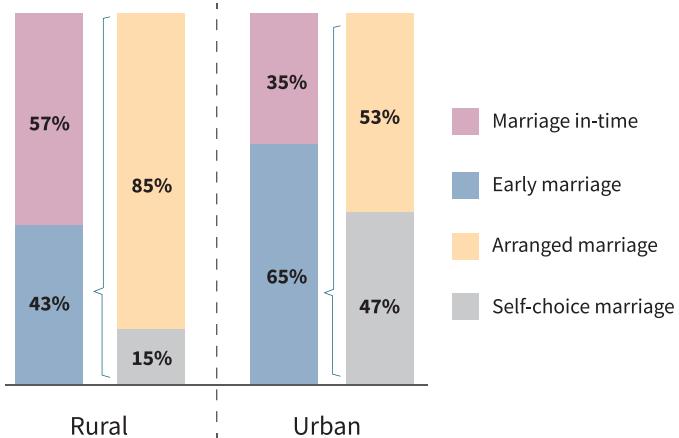
- Enrolment began in December 2022
- Follow-up conducted every four months, with a total of five follow-ups
- Six rounds of data collection in total
- Couples interviewed simultaneously in separate locations

Cohort formation process



Findings

Early marriage was highly prevalent in this cohort and predominantly arranged by families

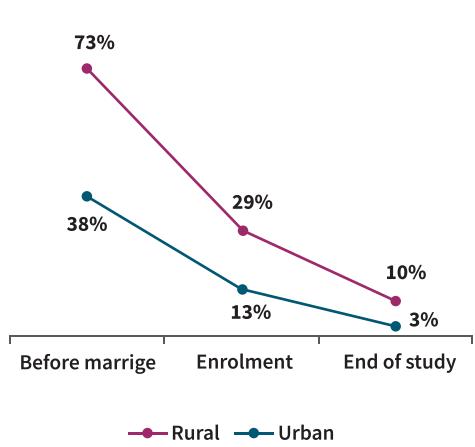


About 43% women in rural areas and 65% in urban areas entered marriage at an early age.

While more common in urban settings, arranged unions dominated across both contexts, with 85% of early rural marriages and 53% of early urban marriages arranged by families.

This pattern reflects the strong influence of cultural norms, economic pressures, and gender inequality, as families often prioritise daughters' roles as wives over education and personal autonomy.

Discontinuation of education was a persistent challenge for young newlywed women



Around two-thirds of wives left education immediately after marriage.

“ I like going to school, but everyone stares at me when I go out. I don't like that. They say, 'Look, Akash's (pseudonym) wife is going to school.' I feel uneasy. They say no married girl studies here - this is the norm.”

- A 17 year old wife

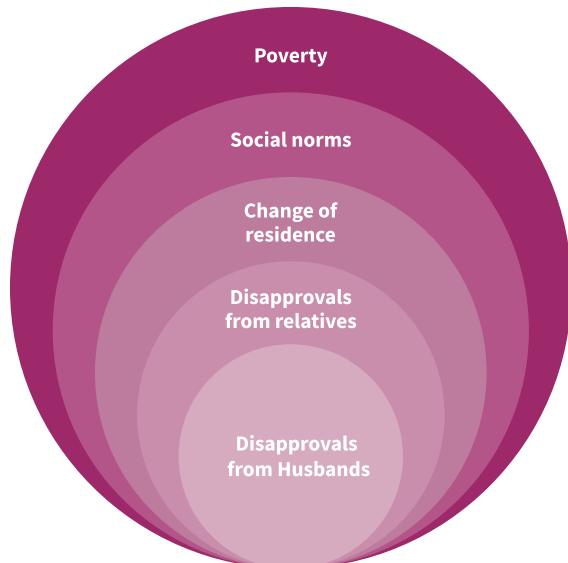
“ He hates the idea of me studying. He says, 'You don't need to study, as I didn't.' I got angry and said, 'No, I will study even if I have to leave you for good.' He let me go to school for a few days, but then he started stopping me again. Some girls choose better options if they are educated, and some men feel insecure because of this.”

- A 13 year old wife

Young women's education often stops after marriage due to husbands' discomfort with wives becoming more qualified, a perspective reinforced by in-laws and, in some cases, their own parents.

Family disapproval is compounded by practical barriers, including school transfers resulting from relocation, restrictive social norms limiting mobility, and the financial burden on husbands or in-laws.

These obstacles are ultimately rooted in poverty, the key driver of early marriage and the primary factor behind educational discontinuation among married adolescent girls in Bangladesh.

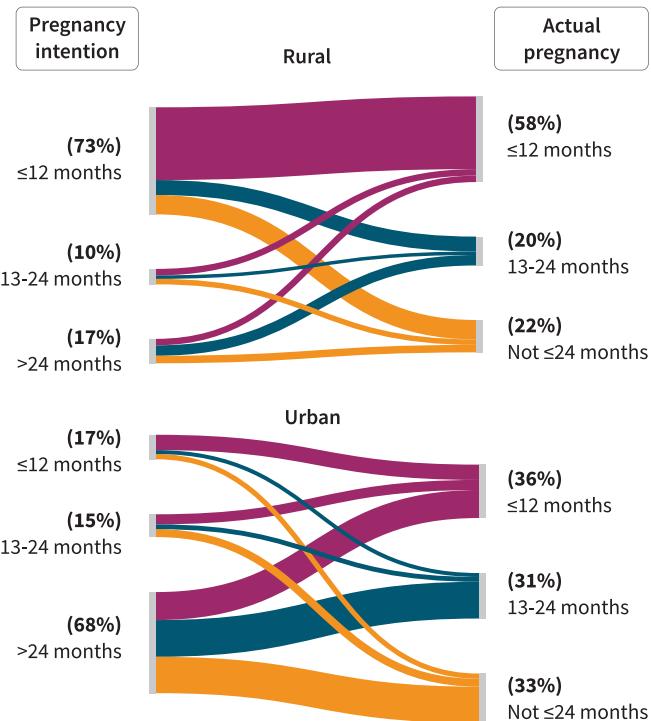


Early childbearing was a prevailing “social norm”

Overall, early pregnancy remained the dominant norm, with 73% of all wives became pregnant within two years; 79% in rural areas and 68% in urban areas, reflecting the pervasive social expectation for early motherhood across settings.

Rural wives faced strong pressure for early childbearing, with 73% wished to conceive within the first year of marriage and 58% actually did so.

Urban wives showed a clear intention-outcome mismatch: only 17% intended to conceive within the first year, yet 36% did so – over twice the planned rate. Similarly, among the 68% who intended to delay pregnancy for at least two years, more than half conceived earlier. These disparities underscored the need for targeted investments in contraceptive access, demand-generation strategies, and strengthened counseling to support women’s reproductive goals.



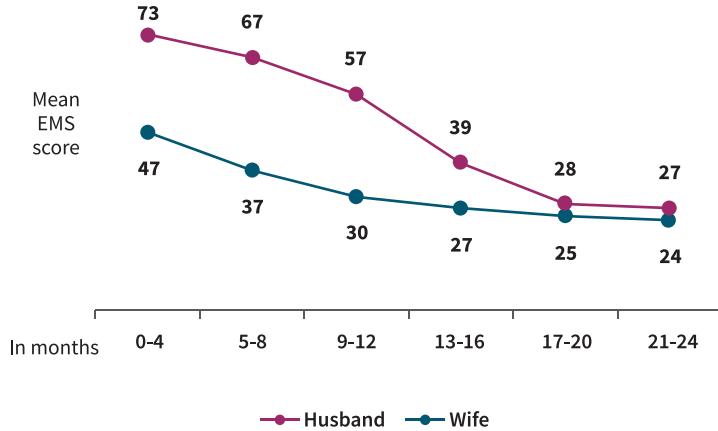
Marital satisfaction declines and, over time, become more similar between spouses

The ENRICH Marital Satisfaction scale, validated for this cohort, was used to compare responses from both spouses.

Initially, husbands reported almost 1.6 times higher satisfaction than wives.

Over time, both partners’ satisfaction declined, with husbands experiencing a sharper drop in the first 12 months.

By one and a half years of marriage, spouse’s satisfaction scores had become similar and remained low.



Initially, marriage enhanced husbands’ satisfaction by enhancing their sense of masculinity and completeness, while wives’ satisfaction was lower due to disrupted living arrangements, interrupted education, and limited work opportunities.

How the study added value

The first cohort study that documented SRHR-related life events of newlywed couples in Bangladesh, providing critical insights into the marital dynamics.

Conducted in rural and low-resource urban settings, the study provides insights across diverse economic and geographic contexts. Unique selection of newlyweds and robust tracking at each site strengthened internal validity.

By following couples from the outset of marriage, the study tracked changes in education, work, marital satisfaction, fertility intentions, intimate partner violence, societal expectations, and decision-making over time.

Separate, simultaneous interviews with each spouse captured individual perspectives on marital dynamics while safeguarding each partner’s position. Using gender-matched interviewers improved data quality and compliance.

References

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