

Husband-wife communication about Family Planning in Bangladesh: Evidence from the 1996-97 Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey

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Introduction

On the past two decades, Bangladesh has achieved a considerable increase in contraceptive use, resulting in an appreciable decline in fertility.

Much of family planning research in Bangladesh has focused on the determinants of women's contraceptive use. However, the role of husband-wife communication in family planning in Bangladesh has been largely ignored. Husband-wife communication is an important factor in the process of decision-making in regard to family size and the adoption of family planning practice (Raju, 1987; Oni and McCarthy, 1991; Kane and Siva, 1989). From a family perspective, the first step in a rational process of fertility decision-making should involve communication between spouses. Such a communication can be an important precursor of lower desired family size and increased contraceptive use (Hollerbach, 1983). Studies have reported that a low level of communication between spouses about family size and family planning is associated with a low level of contraceptive use (Baker, 1996; Shah, 1974; Lozare, 1976). Studies conducted in India also indicate a significant positive association between husband-wife communication and adoption of contraceptive use (Duby, 1967; Poffenberger, 1969; Pillai, 1971; Mukharjee, 1975). A study in Andhra Pradesh in India found that mutual discussion on family planning helps to improve the couple's knowledge about family planning, creates favourable attitudes toward the programme,

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and ultimately helps them to adopt contraception. This study also found that as the majority of the women are illiterate the husband is usually the major source of information about family planning methods. Thus, the husband's role is still very important in communicating family planning methods with his spouse. This study, further, found that spousal communication on family planning was greater among contraceptive adopters than non-adopters (Raju, 1987). A study conducted in Dhaka observed that spousal communication was an important process by which couples reached agreement on each other's intentions regarding child spacing and family size (Green, 1965). Mitchell in his study of husband-wife relationships and family planning in Hong Kong, noted that many women did not practice family planning because of lack of support and encouragement from their husbands, inspite of their favourable inclination to practice family planning (Mitchell, 1972). Therese McGinn and her colleagues in 1989 concluded that men and women in Burkina Faso were poorly informed of each other's attitude, often believing that their partner was ignorant about, and opposed to, family planning, resulting in low level of contraceptive use (McGinn, Bamba and Balma. 1989). Thus, neither sex should be ignored in attempts to understand fertility behavior, and communication between partners is vital for a successful family planning programme (Salway, 1994). A study in Ghana found that the wife's perception of her husband's attitude toward family planning has an impact on contraceptive use through increased discussion of family planning between them. This study also found that discussion between husband and wife about family planning had a significant association with current use of contraception, even when the desire to stop childbearing variable was controlled (Salway 1994).

In Bangladesh, the husband generally plays the key role in family decisions. In such a setting, an understanding of the role of husband-wife communication in reducing fertility or in enhancing the use of contraception is critical. To understand contraceptive behaviour in a couple, one must examine both the husband's and wife's responses. In the 1993-94 BDHS, it was found that approximately 85 percent of wives believe that their husbands approve the use of family planning; 10 percent believe that their husbands disapprove and 5 percent are uncertain. About 77 percent of the wives accurately predicted their husbands' perceptions (Kabir et al., 1996). Data collected by

the Operation Research Project (ORP) of ICDDR,B in 1999 show that 63 percent of those currently using family planning discussed with their husbands about the family planning methods they were using.

In order to gain insight about spousal communication regarding family planning, currently married female respondents in the 1996-97 Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) were asked how often they had talked to their husbands about family planning in the last three months prior to the survey (Mitra et al., 1997). This paper examines the factors associated with husband-wife communication with regard to the use of family planning methods in Bangladesh, a society where marital relationships are generally characterized by husband dominance.

Data and Methodology

For this analysis, data from the 1996-97 Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) have been used. The BDHS employed a nationally representative, two-stage cluster sample design, where 9,127 eligible women (ever-married and aged 10-49 years) were interviewed. In this study, we have considered 7,588 currently married non-sterilized women in the reproductive age. Among these women, 84 percent lived in rural areas and 16 percent lived in urban areas.

In this analysis, the dependent variable is dichotomous: whether or not the women talked with their husbands about family planning methods during the three months period preceding the survey. Several independent variables such as women's age, number of living children, desire for additional children, women's approval of family planning use, women's perceptions about husband's approval of family planning use, women's education, employment status, exposure to mass media, intention to use family planning methods within the next one year period, religion, place of residence, and geographic division were examined in relation to husband-wife family planning communication.

The categories for different independent variables were as follows: age (<25, 25-29, 30-39 and 40-49 year old); living children in the family (no children, 1-2, 3-4 and 5+); desire for more children (within 2 years, later than 2 years, upto God, and want no more); women's approval of family planning use (approve, not approve and unknown); women's perceptions of husbands' approval of family planning (approve, not approve, and don't know); education (no education, primary education, and beyond primary education); employment status (housewife, other than housewife); mass media (those who listen to radio or watch TV at least once a week, and otherwise); intention to use any family planning method (intend to use within 1 year, do not intend to use within one year); religion (muslim, hindu); place of residence (urban and rural); and geographic divisions (Rajshahi and Khulna, and others).

In the logistic regression analysis, whether husband-wife discussion about family planning methods took place during the three months preceding the survey was treated as a dichotomous variable, assigning a value of 1 to those women who had discussed with their husband about any contraceptive methods and 0 to those women who had not discussed. Mother's age, education, and number of living children, and desire for more children have been considered as categorical variables. Other variables have been coded as 1 if an event occurred, and 0 otherwise.

Findings

Table 1 shows the proportion of married women of reproductive age who reported that they had discussed about family planning methods with their husband in the last three months prior to the 1996-97 BDHS, according to their different background characteristics. Overall communication between husband and wife was 52 percent in the three months prior to the 1996-97 BDHS. As age increased, the proportion of women reporting communication on FP with their husbands decreased.

Table 1: Proportion of married women of reproductive age (15-49) who had husband-wife communication about family planning method by their characteristics in Bangladesh

Characteristics	<u>BDHS1996-97</u> N=7588
Age of women (in years)	
<25	55.5 (2830)
25-29	58.7 (1732)
30-39	52.8 (2028)
40-49	25.1 (998)
Number of Living Children	
0	39.6 (889)
1-2	56.2 (3265)
3-4	55.4 (2115)
5 +	41.6 (1319)
Desire for more children	
Within 2 years	42.4 (1343)
Later than 2 years	61.0 (1431)
Up to God	19.4 (155)
Want no more	52.3 (4659)
Women's approval of FP use	
Approve	54.7 (7079)
Not approve	7.9 (406)
Unknown	6.8 (103)
Women 's perceptions about husband's approval of FP use	
Approve	59.5 (6311)
Not approve	14.5 (894)
Unknown	5.5 (383)
Education	
No education	45.6 (3884)
Primary	53.4 (2129)
Above primary	63.4 (1575)
Employment status	
Housewife	51.3 (4994)
Other than housewife	51.8 (2587)

Table 1: (Continued)

Characteristics	<u>BDHS1996-97</u> N=7588
Mass media	
Has access	58.0 (3806)
No access	45.0 (3781)
Religion	
Muslim	51.5 (6781)
Hundu	51.5 (807)
Place of Residence	
Urban	57.9 (1203)
Rural	50.3 (6385)
FP currently using	
Not using	33.2 (4176)
Using	73.9 (3412)
FP ever use	
Not used	25.2 (2290)
Ever used	62.9 (5298)
Intention to use FP within 1 year	
Yes	66.2 (5137)
No	20.9 (2300)
Division	
Barisal	58.9 (800)
Chittagong	46.8 (1165)
Dhaka	49.9 (2087)
Khulna	51.4 (875)
Rajshahi	60.1 (1853)
Sylhet	35.3 (788)

N differ because of missing values for different variables

Women with no children and those with 5 or more children were less likely to report FP communication with their spouses. Two-fifths of women who had no living children discussed family planning with their husbands, while over half of those with 1-4 children reported FP communication with their husbands. The proportion of women reporting communication on FP with their husbands was highest (61%) among those who wanted to have children after two years and lowest (42%) among those who wanted to have children within two years. A considerably higher proportion of women who approve of FP use (55%) reported communication with their husbands than those who did not approve of family planning use (8%). A similar picture is discernible regarding whether the women's husbands approve of FP use. The proportion reporting husband-wife communication about family planning is higher among the educated women; among women having access to mass media than those without; among women living in urban than rural areas; among both ever users and current users of family planning; among those who intend to use family planning in the future (66%) than those not (21%); and among women living in Rajshahi division (60%) than those living in Sylhet division (35%).

Logistic regression estimates have been run with husband-wife communication about family planning methods as the dependent variable. The results are given in Table 2.

Table 2: Logistic regression estimates of the odds ratios (OR=exp(B)) of characteristics of married women of reproductive age on husband-wife communication about family planning method in Bangladesh

Characteristics	Odds ratio
Age of women (in years)	
<25 (R.C) ^a	1.00
25-29	0.91
30-39	0.70***
40-49	0.38***
Number of Living Children	
0 (R.C)	1.00
1-2	1.30**
3-4	1.69***
5 +	1.75***

Table 2: (Continued)

Characteristics	Odds ratio
Desire for more children	
Want no more (R.C)	1.00
Within 2 years	1.19
Later than 2 years	1.03
Up to God	0.68
Women's approval of FP use	
Not approve (R.C)	1.00
Approve	1.63*
Unknown	0.97
Women's perceptions about husband's approval of FP use	
Not approve (R.C)	1.00
Approve	4.16***
Unknown	0.34***
Education	
No education (RC)	1.00
Primary	1.12
Above primary	1.49***
Employment status	
Housewife	1.00
Other than housewife	0.93
Access to Mass media	
No access (RC)	1.00
Has access	1.16*
Intention to use FP within one year	
No (RC)	1.00
Yes	4.69***
Religion	
Muslim (R.C)	1.00
Hindu	0.88

Table 2: (Continued)

Characteristics	Odds ratio
Place of Residence	
Urban	1.00
Rural	1.02
Region	
Rajshahi/Khulna	1.00
Others	0.95
-2Log- likelihood	
No.	8257***
df	7429
Intercept:	21
	-2.99***

*p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001, a RC = Reference Category

The probability of husband-wife communication is statistically higher among women who approve of family planning use than those who do not. The probability of husband-wife communication is over four times higher among women whose husbands approve of family planning use than those whose husbands do not approve of family planning use. The probability of inter-spousal communication is higher among women with schooling beyond the primary level; among women having access to mass media than those without; and over four times higher among women who intend to use family planning in the future than those who do not intend.

Discussion

The results of the study indicate that husband-wife communication about family planning in Bangladesh is influenced by at least six factors. These include number of living children, future intention to use family planning, husbands' approval of family planning use, women's approval of family planning use, women's education,

and access to mass media. Similar evidence is available from other studies conducted elsewhere. For example, Hill, Stycos and Back, (1959), Mitchell, (1972) and Kabir et al., (1988) found evidence of the influence of women's status and education on husband-wife communication.

Husband-wife communication about family planning is not necessary for adoption of certain methods; however, its absence may be a serious impediment to use. Interspousal communication is, therefore, an important intermediate step along the path to eventual adoption and sustained use of contraception. Thus, for the Bangladesh family planning programme, indeed, the overall reproductive health programme, it is quite critical that efforts are taken to further strengthen inter-spousal communication.

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