Worried Lives: Poverty, Gender and Reproductive Health for Adolescent Women in a Slum in Dhaka, Bangladesh

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Abstract

Rapid urbanization, social and political-economic inequalities are reshaping the dynamics of reproductive behavior in the slum. Ethnographic data was collected over a 14 month-period, using a variety of methods: 153 surveys, 50 repeated in-depth interviews and 8 case studies with adolescent women and their families. Out of 153, 72% of married adolescent women were forced to bear children before they were ready. Young women recognize that children are a necessity, a practical requirement as marital breakdowns are increasing and young women hope that they can rely on their children for financial support. Institutional and systemic inequalities, socio-cultural norms and harsh political economic conditions reinforce the need for sons in the slums. Unlike females, males are unconstrained by the ideologies of *pardah* and can work at a relatively young age, without fears of sexual harassment. There is more employment opportunities for young males in the city. Although children are valued, chronic poverty also means that there is this tension around fertility and in the 50 in-depth interviews, 20% of young women were also forced to terminate their first pregnancies. Reproductive micro politics of unpaid dowry, desertion, polygamy and rivalry among family members, in-laws and co-wives, and overall competition over limited resources are many of the reasons given for forced terminations. Unequal gender and power relations combined with structural and political-economic inequalities force many poor married adolescent women go along with decisions, which adversely affect their reproductive bodies and health, but they do so to gain advantages under conditions of extreme destitution and limited options.

Introduction

The mechanisms through which social change, factors such as urbanization and its affects on the lives of the urban poor, particularly married adolescent women and their health continues to remain inadequately understood and overlooked in Bangladesh. Landlessness and poverty in rural areas have led to rapid migration of the rural poor to the city, increasing the population of the urban poor and doubling Dhaka's population in the past ten years. Structural and social inequalities, a harsh political economy, and consistent neglect from the State and policymakers have made them an underclass. Influenced by literature on structural violence, political economy of fertility, feminism and demography, in this paper I show how reproductive behavior is grounded in the political economic structures of life for urban poor women [Farmer, 1996; Singer, Baer & Lazarus, 1990; Greenhalgh, 1994; Horton, 1999; Riley, 1999]. I will illustrate how a dynamic urban landscape, competition for scarce resources and brutal poverty create dilemmas and contradictions for young women and impact on their fertility decisions, which have both beneficial and harmful consequences on their bodies and their reproductive health experiences.

Demographers have tracked fertility decline in Bangladesh for over a decade now, but little is known of the synergistic effects of macro political economic conditions and social and cultural factors, which interweave through women's reproductive health experiences and impact on their lives. The study of fertility in anthropology has traditionally centered on its symbolic associations, but with the growth of the political economic approaches, anthropologists are increasingly including the economic and political dimensions of this experience (Greenhalgh 1995; Greenhalgh, 1994; Kielmann, 1998). A political economy of fertility, is a 'multi-leveled field of inquiry that pays attention to historical, political and economic, social and cultural forces.' It includes feminist concerns with 'societal structure and individual agency' and power relations to understand reproductive dynamics (Greenlagh, 1995: 13).

Urbanization: Chronic Poverty & Disrupted Lives

The population of Bangladesh was at 75 million in the early 70s and has doubled to 145 million in 2002. Dhaka City, has seen its population rapidly increase in the last 30 years to over ten million, mainly because of rural –urban migration. In the past ten years the population of all urban areas in the country grew by about 38% compared to only 10% growth in rural areas. Much of this increase is linked to landlessness, poverty and poor rural people moving to cities in search of employment. It is estimated that by the year 2015 the population of Dhaka City, the capital will be almost double to around 21 million, making it the ninth largest city in the world (Afsar 2000). Out of the population of 145 million, at least 70 million live in absolute poverty (Haider, Streatfield & Karim, 1994). Sixty one percent of the urban poor live in households where the monthly household income is only Taka 2,500 - about US $63 (Perry, 2000).

Scarcity of land in Dhaka City means that most urban slum residents live insecure lives, residing illegally on slums which are government or privately owned land, not knowing when they might be forcibly removed. Life in the slum is precarious. Less than 1% of the all slum residents own the land they live on. All of the slum residents live in constant fear of becoming homeless and worry that municipal authority or private landlords may evict them at any moment. Unskilled for employment in the formal labor market, many of the urban poor migrants remain permanently unemployable, and engage in economic activities that fall primarily within the informal labor market. Poor skill levels are often a result of lower levels of education and work as petty traders, domestic servants, wage laborers, sex workers, etc. As migration flow increases towards urban areas, the pressure on the labor market also increases, making the sector over saturated and competitive (Afsar, 2000).

In Bangladesh, marriage is the only acceptable option for a large part of the population, and allows individuals to have sexual relations without risk of social sanctions, and confers social identity, particularly on women. An adult woman

who is unmarried is anomalous. Adult men are also expected to marry (Jesmin & Salway, 2000; Khan, Townsend & D'Costa, 2002). In poor families, marriage is expected to take place soon after a young girl menstruates, at which time she moves directly from her own household to that of her husband's. However, in the urban slums, the conditions of life are very different and with increasing poverty, marital disruption is common. The main reason given for martial disruption is blamed on high unemployment and poverty. Out of the 153 in the survey, 23.5% of adolescent women's husbands did not work regularly. Urban poor males frustrated by their inability to support their wives are turning to substance abuse, indulging in polygamy or abandoning their wives. Patriarchy, crime and social and cultural pressures force many adolescent women to tolerate their husband's behavior, for their own protection, social recognition and respectability. Many young women, who are deserted by their husbands, find that work, low wages and discrimination in the workforce and in the slum ensures that they are worse off alone than in households headed by males.

Political-economic conditions has led to the increased divergence of males and females interests, which is leading to the breakdown of the 'moral economy of the family' (Kabeer, 1989), and impacting on fertility and abortion behavior in the slum. Chronic poverty and limited resources also impact on the level of parental and family support a young woman can expect. Chronic poverty, competition for scarce resources are affecting the kind of support young women can rely on from their families. Out of the 50 repeated in-depth interviews, forty percent of married adolescent women either had a stepparent, a father who had remarried, and stepsiblings. Research has documented that relations within stepfamilies are complex and strained, and competition for limited resources means that stepchildren are treated badly (Jesmin & Salway, 2000). Thus, in most cases, family support from parents and extended family tends to be uneven. As the narratives below show, all of these larger macro and micro processes shape the micro-politics of reproductive health behavior for married young women.

Methodology

Ethnographic anthropological fieldwork was carried out for a period of 14 months in Dhaka City, Bangladesh. The study site was a large urban slum, which will be referred to as Phulbari for the purpose of this paper. The focus was on the reproductive health needs of married adolescent women [defined by the World Health Organization as 10-19 years]. Altogether 153 surveys, 50 repeated in-depth interviews were carried out with married adolescent women. Eight case studies with young women and their families were carried out. Long term participant observations was also carried out in order to get beyond what people say they do to observe actual behavior in the community. SPSS software was used to analyze the quantitative data and Atlas qi software was used to analyze the qualitative data.

Findings

Having a Baby: Reproductive Gains and their Costs

In the slum, reproductive practices particularly child bearing is shaped as much by social and cultural ideals, as by the reality of chronic poverty, high marital insecurity and gender and power inequalities, which govern young women's lives. Browner (2001) notes that much of the literature assumes that men and women share similar reproductive interests, which is not the case, in fact reproduction is a potentially contested domain. In the slum, reproductive interests differed between young women and their husbands, in-laws and their mothers. Although many adolescent women value children, out of the 153 married young women, 72% said that they were coerced into childbearing soon after marriage, when they were not ready. There are strong pressures to prove one's fertility as soon as possible after marriage. Having a child provides a young woman with social acceptance and ability to achieve social adulthood. Children are valued for bringing happiness to a household and increasing the emotional bond between a husband and wife, and ensure marital and economic security for young women. In the context of slum life, the reality of poverty and high marital instability means that young women

and their family hope that the birth of a child will improve the marriage and rectify their husband's behavior, and give them more power and room to negotiate. Male drug use was a common problem in the slum. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, in the in-depth interviews, less than 8% of the adolescent women admitted their husband had a serious addiction problem. Many adolescent women said that hoped that the birth of a child would improve their husband's behavior, bringing them closer together and cement their own position in the household. Shohagi's [14 years old] husband had pressured her into childbearing. Initially she resisted but this began to affect her relationship with her husband. She also realized that because she had had a love marriage against the wishes of her in-laws, the only way her relationship might improve with her husband and them, was the birth of a baby.

Shohagi: My husband and I had a love marriage. Soon after the marriage he started talking about children but I didn't feel ready but he really wanted a baby. I was working in the garments. I wanted to work for longer, save up some money and then have a child. But he said, 'you don't need a job, you take a child.' My mother convinced me to have a baby to make him happy.

Her mother interrupts and states' My son-in-law would not work and they were always fighting. Also his parents started taking advantage of this situation and said, 'we won't take such a black girl and started demanding dowry money. Her husband would gamble and beat her up. He wouldn't feed her rice properly. But after the birth of the child, everything changed. Her in-laws love her now and her husband's whole world is his baby.

Shohagi replies, 'My mother said that it was the only way to make him more responsible and make the marriage stronger… After my first daughter was born his maya [affection/love] increased for me. I am young I know but when I didn't have a child in my home, it wasn't a shongshar [marriage] in my home, it felt like we were dolls playing a house. Then once I had a child it became a household. He is pleased with me and he gives me whatever I need. Before he would give his brothers and sisters his income, but now he gives me his income. If one has a

child, Apa [sister] you can exercise your rights but if you don't have a child then you have no rights.

Once a woman has produced a child, perhaps, a son, but even daughters, she enters a new phase in her life. The literature shows that she can often initiate the separation of the joint household, and possesses greater domestic power and decision making in the household (Stark, N.N, 1993). Moreover, a child tends to strengthen the marital relationship, and women hope that the husband becomes increasingly attached to his children and spouse. Some of the men appeared to have extremely close and loving relationships with their children in the slum, and continued to play an important role in their lives, even when they moved out and remarried. Thus, young women hope that children will ensure continued emotional ties and financial support for the household, even if the marriage broke down.

Thus, married adolescent women are caught in a dilemma; emotionally and physically not quite ready to bear children, but they are aware of the positive advantages of children. Married adolescent women spoke of their children as 'evidence' [proof] of an obligation fulfilled, which ideally should ensure them greater rights over their husbands. Shohagi's story was typical for many young women. They hope that the birth of a child can improve relations with the husband and also with disapproving in-laws, who may not accept the marriage because it was done without their approval or because of unpaid dowry demand. Despite their being a State law against dowry, most poor families and grooms except the bride to bring in money or goods in kind [referred to as demand/dowry] at the time of marriage.

Value of sons in a harsh urban environment: Pragmatic behavior

Married adolescent women realize that social acceptance and security in the marital home are established largely through fertility, particularly through the birth of a son. Studies in rural areas of Bangladesh have found sons are valued

above daughters for their economic value in providing help to the family, working on the farm and land, providing security for parents in old age and in carrying on the family line (Cain, 1977; Khuda, 1977; Caldwell, Jalaluddin, & Caldwell & Cosford, 1984). The preference for sons is also evident in the dynamic and changing urban landscape, where chronic poverty, crime and female vulnerability is widespread, and having a son can ensure long-term security, social, political and economic for adolescent woman.[i] Virtually every slum is neglected by the government, and has its own leadership/mastaan structure, with its own gangs and recognizable leaders and territory. Life is extremely precarious in slums, with gang violence and crime and drugs rampant. In Phulbari, gang wars between youths broke out frequently, with most of the violence connected to rivalry between male gangs over control of the drug trade in the slum. In the city, poor parents tend to lose control over their children, particularly their sons. While girls are socialized to stay at home and are supervised more tightly because of fears of loss of virginity or a tainted reputation, boys are given freedom and mobility in Bangladesh (B1anchet, 1996). Loss of land and having no viable inheritance, parents lose whatever control left. Poor, young unemployed youths dislocated and with limited job opportunities, turn to gang membership because it offers them some form of power, prestige, and money.

For women, sons are valued for more pragmatic reasons. With increasing marital instability and absentee husbands, women hope to rely on their younger children, particularly sons, to work and contribute income to the household. Sons provide income as well as provide a degree of social protection in the absence of other male guardians. When Shoma's husband remarried she was very upset, and because she had two young daughters, she felt even more vulnerable: 'Apa now my husband has gone, what will I do with these two girls? I have two girls and they are getting older. If there is no husband then can I live in a slum? *Why cant you?* Apa, I have no son, we are all girls. Without a man how will I stay here? A male can work and bring money home. If there is no male in a household, how will one manage?' Unlike adolescent females, young males are not restricted by

ideologies of *pardah* and can work at a relatively young age, without fear of rape and harassment in and outside the slum. Younger and older women spoke of the burden of worrying about safeguarding one's daughter's *izzat* [honor] whereas boys were free to do as they pleased.

In addition to the control of female sexuality, in the economic arena young women's employment opportunities are much more limited compared to males, both in rural and urban areas. Females are excluded from a whole range of jobs in the City. These include, the transport sector, most skilled craft-work and the majority of the service industry and retail sector jobs, and working in certain markets which involve movement at night (Salway, Rahman, & Jesmin, 2003). The extremely gendered nature of the labor market provides insight into the high value placed on the birth of sons in extremely poor households, where wage employment is crucial for survival. Although young women are increasingly offered opportunities to work in the City, it is in a narrow range of occupations; garment factory or as domestic servants, and brick-breaking work, which is common among older women, with the last two viewed as extremely inferior with low wages. While females are also contributing to the household and have greater decision making roles, they continue to still have limited scope for economic and social independence. This is because local power and patriarchal structures remain against females (Salway, Rahman, & Jesmin, 2003). This was apparent when sudden evictions resulted in large numbers of families becoming homeless overnight in late July in the slum. A few families decided to return to the village with their young daughters, and their only recourse was to leave their young male sons behind in the City to continue working and send money back to the village. To find appropriate accommodation and remain in the City is not as difficult or as worrying for young males, but young females are far more vulnerable to harassment and threats of sexual violence.

A patriarchal organizing society means that the slum is a male dominated environment and men tend to have more authority within and outside the

household. The following narrative illustrates how men play a decisive role in the private and public arena, and use their masculinity and networks with other male peers in the community to flex their muscles, assert power and control over others. Shuli's [married adolescent woman, 13 years old] was forcibly sent back to her natal home by her mother-in-law, who constantly mistreated her. An unplanned meeting took place a few days later, when her mother-in-law visited her natal home to take Shuli back to the in-laws home. Shuli's father had passed away five years ago but it was her elder brother, being the only male guardian, who intervened and mediated the dispute. After some initial comments her elder brother refused to negotiate with the mother-in-law in the absence of the father-in-law and taunted her for taking on a 'man's role':

> He looks at the mother-in-law and states, ''I am not going to talk to any woman. Let a man come and I will talk to him. My sister got married on her own. I gave her in school to study but she did prem [love affair] and got married on her own. Listen, I live in a society. I am a Mirpur boy [familiar to locality] and I maybe a wrong *baj* [thug] myself and bad; but I have not brought my younger sister up to be rude or bad. She can be at fault at times but she is a good girl…we want to know what happened. Now even if I want to call anyone, a thousand people will come running to our aid [showing off their power and strength]. We are 2 brothers and I have 5 uncles in this area. We are a well-known family and we know everyone. Ask about me in this area. Does anyone say anything bad about me? About 90% of the people will say good things about me. What will I talk to you about? Listen, sister, the men of your household let them be men. Give them a chance to speak. We are also husbands and we have wives, but none of our wives talk over us!' He adds [after a pause], 'it seems that in the 90s I left the arms [weapons] behind me but I will have to start taking up arms [criminal activity] again.'

During the discussion, Shuli's brother did not directly attack the mother-in-law's mistreatment of his sister. More significantly, during the discussions Shuli's elder brother makes references to his tough image and reputation and his wider links in the community. He stresses that they can count on a large number of male kin

who ‘will come running to our aid’ and even threatens to ‘take up arms’ [weapons] again, to intimidate Shuli’s mother-in-law and her family. This is deliberately to boast of the power and strength of his male network. His approach wavers between aggressiveness and conciliatory, and towards the end, he softens slightly and states that he will allow his sister to return to her in-laws home, but only after he meets the father-in-law. What is apparent in the discussion is that the presence of a strong male guardian, and a wide network of males, be it, husband, sons, uncles [even fictive kin], result in a stronger power base for the family and for young women to negotiate. Unlike females, males are socialized to congregate outside the home, spending time at the shops, and in this way they are able to develop relationships with other male peers in the community. Status for young males is gained through their tough image, fighting skills, and close social networks with other males in the slum, from which women are excluded.

For example, when Moni’s [married adolescent and separated from her husband] salary was withheld for three months, she turned to her brother and his group of close male friends for assistance, who threatened the manager at her garment factory to pay her as soon as possible. Rani, was a leader’s wife, and after a gang war, a rival leader threatened her. Her husband had gone into hiding and in his absence she relied on her eldest son [17 years old] and his network of male friends to confront the leader and sort out the situation. Shaheeda, [16 years old] is an unmarried adolescent woman, who works at the garment factory, seven days a week till late at night. She informed us that unlike some of the other females, she was never harassed and did not have her pay packet robbed by gang members, because her brother was well known in the slum and had close relations with many of them. Thus, in the context of a patriarchal dominated society and an insecure and crime-ridden environment, sons/males can provide a degree of protection for women, where violence is a socially sanctioned means of dealing with conflict. Also in the context of destitution, marital instability and increasing vulnerability for married adolescent women, the presence of males, particularly sons, means both economic and social protection. Males provide links to local and

social networks and power relations, which is crucial for women's survival in the slum and in the City.

The presence of a son can also increase a woman's strength and position in her marriage and in the community. An older woman explains to a younger woman why it is important to have sons: 'look you have to understand one thing, I have two sons and I am in so much peace. People think twice before they say anything to me. If I have any problems with outsider, my sons are there. But why should I talk about outside people? If my husband fights with me, then my sons take my side. They work and they look after me. They fight with their father and they fight for me. Then what do I realize? I have sons and that is why my husband treats me with respect and is good to me. If had a daughter he would behave differently. Then he would say to me, 'you don't have strength. What is your power?' While sons are important, many older and adolescent women realize that having sons does not necessarily ensure long-term security. There were many stories of sons who neglect their parents and set up separate households after marriage circulating in the slum. Some of the women argue that often it was daughters who support their families in old age rather than sons, working hard in the factory or at home in income generating activities.

Despite this, the reality is that sons may bring in dowry [cash] into extremely poor families through marriage, whereas girls require payments of dowry, which is a large burden. A young woman explained why girls were such an encumbrance on families, 'to get a daughter married off, one needs 20,000 to 50,000 taka [US $ 300-900] dowry these days. This is pressure by the daughters on her parents.' Further, religious and patriarchal ideologies ensure males have greater property and legal rights than females. A male has the right to unilateral divorce, the right to guardianship and custody of children from a marriage, and a double share in the parental property. One man is equated to two women in legal testimony (Mansoor, 1999:25). Thus, systemic structures and power relations favor the situation for males.

Terminations: Are there any gains and losses for young women?

There is this tension surrounding childbearing in the slum. While many married adolescent women are forced to bear children or see it as a pragmatic decision; there were quite a few young women who do want to have children but were compelled to end their pregnancies because of the pressures of poverty and reproductive micro-politics in the household. In the survey of 153 married adolescent women, 25 of them admitted to terminating their first or subsequent pregnancies.[ii] Many young women in the slum value children, but are not keen to have large families because of the destitution and insecurity in their lives.[iii] Some of the young women spoke of the difficulties of looking after more than one young child and preferred to terminate and wait before they had a second child. Many of the young women have incorporated the discourse of family planning campaigns, which link smaller family size to better economic conditions and hope to improve their quality of life. A common justification for termination is the risk of early childbearing. Married adolescent women and their families employ widespread health Safe Motherhood messages, which depict early childbearing as extremely dangerous. They argue that it is safer to terminate the pregnancy rather than endanger the life of the adolescent girl. Ironically, the means to regulate fertility is through illegal and legal termination rather than family planning use. Available literature demonstrates that often values, ideologies and concepts related to abortion, or legal termination of a pregnancy are culturally and historically constructed and definitions of motherhood and pregnancy change over time (Rylko-Bauer, 1996).

Chronic poverty and harsh political economic conditions of life also mean that twenty percent of the young women in the 50 in-depth interviews and case studies were coerced into terminating their first pregnancy. Reproduction is a potentially disputed arena and the forced regulation of pregnancies is (not only) about a 'gendered divergence' of reproductive goals (Sargent & Cordell, 2003:1961), as in the slum both males, husbands and fathers-in-law; and females, mothers-in-law

and co-wives, pressured young women to end their pregnancies. Extreme deprivation and rivalry over resources and asymmetrical relationships ensure that adolescent women have few options to resist such demands.

No Dowry Money, No Baby: 'Stratified' Reproduction!

Bina, (a 17 year old adolescent woman) fell in love and married her co-worker in the garment factory, Bulbul, who is 20 years old. The marriage took place despite her parent's anger and protests. They were unable to stop the marriage as they lived in the village and Bina was independent, earning her own income and living in the city with her uncle. After a whirlwind courtship of one year, Bina and Bulbul decided to get married. Although her in-laws did not protest about the marriage she knew that they were not happy because she had not paid any dowry at the time of marriage, but her husband insisted that she did not have to pay any dowry. They settled comfortably into married life and lived in her in-law's home in the slum. After 6 months of marriage, Bina fell pregnant. However, when she fell pregnant her relationship quickly soured with her father-in-law who pressured her into terminating her pregnancy. She was extremely disappointed that her husband did not defend her and chose to go along with his father's decision:

> I thought I had jaundice. A couple of months after my marriage I began to feel weak and tired all the time. My husband forced me to go to the doctor who did a check up and informed me that I was pregnant. When we were leaving the clinic, my husband said, 'let's not keep the child, you are not well at all. You look so sick. My grandmother-in-law brought medicine [abortion medicine] from the local healer …[her voice starts shaking now] my father-in- law wants me to work and bring money for the household. If I fall pregnant I cannot work, can I? She brought the indigenous medicines the very next day after our visit to the clinic, but when nothing happened, then my father-in-law went and spoke to health workers about a possible MR [menstrual regulation].[iv] I overheard them speaking about the costs of the MR. *What did you think?* I thought to myself what is the point of me saying anything. My father-in-law has no intention of letting me keep the baby. If I don't listen to him, I will have to suffer and hear words. Then who

will feed the baby if no one wants the baby in the household I felt very sad initially. It was our first child and I thought that he [husband] would also want to keep the child, but he is too scared of his father. He didn't want the child but then again he did. He said, 'If you want to really keep it then keep it, but his heart was not in it and I didn't want to have a child and give it suffering. If there are costs for the child I will always have to hear about it. [She starts crying –we stop interview…and then she starts after five minutes] …when I got married and I came to this home my father-in-law said to me, 'you have to work for 2 years and then give me all your earnings. *Why did he say that?* Well if he had got his son married he could have got taka 50,000 for him in dowry money so I have to make up for it. He does not misbehave with me though. *Were you upset with your husband because he didn't support you?* I was upset but what can he do as well. We live at my father- in-law's place and he provides us a roof over our heads. I have married him now and my parents have nothing to do with me. It is better that I keep quiet and do what my in law thinks is best…I was sick for 12 days and I lost my job at the garment factory. When you don't have money in your hands then you have tension… you have tension about the future. If one has money in their hands then they have everyone else in their hands… My husband gives his entire salary to my father-in-law…

Bina, like many poor adolescent women in the slum, is not in a position to negotiate her situation. However, married adolescent women who can afford to pay dowry and have strong natal and spousal support, are likely to face less pressure and maybe allowed to reproduce. This situation is what Ginsburg and Rapp (1995), refers to, in the concept of 'stratified reproduction,' where power relations decide which categories of people are empowered to nurture and reproduce while others are unable to do so.

Although, some young women were forced to terminate their pregnancy, a few of them resisted such pressures. Rashida [16 years old] lived with her husband in her in-law's home. Like Bina, she also had a love marriage and did not pay any dowry at the time of marriage. When her in-laws found out she was pregnant, they insisted she terminate her pregnancy but she refused. Rashida's husband did not

work regularly and her in-laws wanted her to continue working at the garment factory and provide for the family, but she stopped working five months into her pregnancy. Her husband's and in-laws reliance on her income meant that they saw little or no gain personally from her having a child in the immediate future. Instead the birth of the child was seen as a burden and they realized would lead to loss of Rashida's income. As a result, when she suffered from serious labor complications during her pregnancy, her in-laws refused to cover the costs of taking her to the nearest clinic/hospital. According to her, since she had not been able to pay dowry, neither her husband nor her in-laws felt obliged to contribute towards her pregnancy costs, particularly because they didn't want the baby. Rashida said, 'in the end it was the neighbors who brought my mother, and it was mother and my older brother [lives nearby] who spent taka 5000 [US $90] and took me to the hospital.'

Although Rashida had some support from her mother and was able to defy her in-laws, and gave birth to a baby boy, she continued to be subjected to verbal and physical abuse from her in-laws and her husband. In this case, Rashida productivity is given priority and valued, instead of her reproductive capabilities. However, Rashida and Bina, like most married adolescent women are in a dilemma. They are expected to produce an income for the family at present but in the near future they will also be expected to reproduce for the family. Thus, the political economic conditions have worsened the situation for young women, where their reproductive abilities do not necessarily have the same value and status it once had, and instead they are expected to work and earn an income and contribute to the household. Rashida had hoped that the birth of the child, particularly a baby boy, would improve her relationship with her husband, but it did not improve her power and status in her marriage and her relationship with her husband and in-laws.

Polygamy & Co-wives: Jealousy, Insecurity & Manipulation

Eleven percent of married adolescent women admitted to being separated from their husbands and twenty-three percent of young women admitted to sharing their husbands with co-wives.[v] The existence of co-wives aggravates jealousy and insecurity among the women and shapes their fertility behavior. In polygamous households, competition for resources is more than compared to other households. Rivalries with co-wives over finances as well as the insecurity of wanting to strengthen emotional and sexual ties with husbands compel some co-wives to try and have a baby soon after marriage.[vi] This was the case of Dolly, [15 years old] who wanted to have a baby and seal her marriage and relationship with her husband, as she was his second wife. He was previously married and had two children and continued to maintain close relations with his first wife and children. Below is a discussion that takes place between Dolly and her husband, over her pregnancy. Dolly was four months pregnant but her husband wants her to abort the child. She claims that she is too weak to abort the child:

> Dolly angrily comments [looking at her husband]: 'See, I am nothing to him. But if I have a child he will have to buy it milk. He buys those children [from first wife] milk but he does not make a big deal of it, but when it comes to me it is a different story! I am not going to get rid of this child.'

> The husband said to me [researcher]: 'Apa [sister] I can only pick up two mounds on my head but if someone gives me more than 3 mounds can I lift it then? Tell me Apa. I told Dolly to abort the child. I will suffer, as this child is also mine. But if the child is born then I won't be able to take care of it and I won't be able to manage. This child is still in the stomach so I have no maya [affection] for it but once it is born then wont I have a different kind of affection for the child. Then will I be able to do anything? But this I cannot explain to her.'

> Dolly responds angrily, 'I will keep the baby and if I take this child you will have to give milk for it. I know why you don't want me to keep the child, it is to keep her happy [first wife]. He already has children so why would he be interested in having any more children.'

[He is silent]…and then he states, 'I earn 7000 taka and I give Dolly more money. I pay for her rent; which is taka 500 and I also give her weekly taka 300 for the food costs…'

A few weeks after this discussion, Dolly ended her pregnancy. She was extremely upset that her husband did not support her and decided there was no point in continuing the pregnancy. She initially purchased some pills from the pharmacy but when that did not work, she asked her husband to pay for her menstrual regulation from the local clinic. She was so upset after the termination that she moved out of her husband's home and moved in with her elder female cousin, Shehnaz who also lived in the slum. Since then, her husband has been pleading with her to return to him, but she refused.

In the case of Dolly, the fact that her husband already has children meant that he was not interested in supporting another child. Dolly is concerned that her husband's behavior and indifference to her pregnancy may actually reflect his sentiments towards her as a new wife and reveals the stronger ties he may have with his first wife. Dolly was eager to have a baby as soon as possible to hold on to her husband's affections long term and to mark her position in the household, improve her status and power compared to that of the first wife.

For example, in Maliya's case, [14 years old], she was married for less than one year and was caught in the politics between her two mothers-in-law, and suffered the consequences. Maliya's husband's stepmother arranged their marriage, but soon after the marriage, Maliya moved in with her husband to his own mother's home. However, Maliya continued to remain close to her father-in-law's much younger second wife. Her mother-in-law constantly harassed her. Maliya admits that the jealousy between her mother-in-law and the much younger co-wife, and her close relationship with the co-wife, was the one of the main reasons for the tension between them. When Maliya fell pregnant, her mother-in-law insisted that she terminate her pregnancy, using the discourse of public health campaigns and

cited her young age as a great risk factor. In addition, Maliya's husband did not support her decision to continue the pregnancy and sided with his mother. Since Maliya lives in the first mother-in-law's home, the father-in-law and his second wife did not interfere for fear of antagonizing the first wife and sons. Maliya's parents live in the village and did not want to interfere. Private discussions with Maliya's mother-in-law, Sufia, reveal underlying tensions about her co-wife, daughter-in-law and her insecurity about losing control over her son:

> *Did Maliya want to abort the child? Did your son want her to abort the child?* Maliya did not want to abort the child but my son was not agreeable to this. I thought she was too young. He felt he was too young and it was too soon for them to have children. This son of mine did not want to get married even. He did not like her. That woman [co-wife] picked her out for my son. *Why did she want a child immediately?* She wanted to take a child immediately. Then she would trap my son. *Why do you say that?* She would be able to hold on to my son. If she gave him a baby boy, he would listen to her and she could do what she wanted. But it didn't quite work out like that and I told her she must get rid of the child and she was too young. Then she would just do what she wanted to do and go wherever she wants and then we wouldn't be able to say anything…You see that woman [co-wife] also immediately gave birth to a baby, she couldn't even wait long before she was producing a baby for my husband…

Thus, interpersonal conflicts between co-wives also impact on young women's reproductive health choices. In this situation, Maliya's mother-in-law, Sufia, fears her position is shaky, as her husband has remarried a much younger woman who has already given birth to a baby boy. Sufia only has her two sons to rely on for her future economic and social security. Despite the fact that her husband owns numerous small grocery stores in the slum and land in the village, under Islamic law, a mother can only inherit one eight of her husband's property if she is widowed. Her two sons and any children the second wife bears will inherit almost all of her husband's property. Since her husband's remarriage, she is anxious about losing control over her sons who her only remaining support. Much of the

literature illustrates widowhood and women without sons to rely on, are at greater risk of illnesses, poverty, with their only recourse being begging and death [Abdullah & Zeidenstein, 1982; Lindenbaum, 1974; Rahman, Foster & Menken, 1992). Sufia is anxious that if Maliya has a baby then her son will shift his affections to her and the newborn baby. This will automatically result in the transfer of his finances to the needs of his own family. Sufia recognizes that she is very dependent on her sons and needs them for her future protection. While she still has the power to dictate over household matters, she will continue to act in her own best interests, even if it harms her daughter-in-law.

Struggles over termination of a pregnancy provide an insight into the complex inter-relationships between structural conditions, political-economic conditions and gender and power inequalities within groups of women and with men, which interweave and shape the nature of relationships between husbands and wives, brides and in-laws, and among co-wives and impact on reproductive behavior. Married adolescent women's bodies become sites of struggle and manipulation, and they are forced to make a trade-off between long term support and security and risking their reproductive bodies. In the context of limited options, they hope to gain some advantage under extreme conditions.

Conclusion

The paper illustrates how the micro level politics of reproductive behavior has a strong connection to larger socio-cultural, political and economic inequalities. Young women's reproduction aspirations appear to be at odds with others and they remain vulnerable to control and manipulation of their reproductive bodies. Although many married adolescent women were forced to bear children even when they were emotionally unprepared, they recognize the practical advantages of having children. Thus, as much as children are loved for personal, social and moral reasons, the birthing experience is also a political act for young women (Handwerker, 1990).

Young women's status is changing in multi-directional ways, as traditional norms and behavior break down and they lose ground in this new urbanized environment of uncertainty. The high incidence of desertion and polygamy leave young women vulnerable. They hope that their young children will work and contribute to the household. Patriarchy, social and cultural norms control the sexuality of young women and the gendered structures of jobs favor males, which reinforce the value of sons in poor urban households. However, increasingly young females are praised for contributing to the household, but religious and patriarchal structures are biased towards males and they have greater rights in the public arena, in marriage, property and inheritance rights and legally. There is an absence of law and order and the slum terrain is seen as dangerous and violent. Local power structures are controlled and dominated by males and females are subordinate and excluded from this male network. This means that having supportive sons, or male guardians, creates a stronger power base for married adolescent women.

Women gain status and security by bearing children, but there is this tension around fertility as many young women are not only pressured into giving birth but also compelled to end their pregnancy. The economic value of children is increasingly questioned in the light of chronic poverty. Economic constraints, politics, asymmetrical gender and power relations in the household between husbands and wives, and young women and their in-laws and relations between co-wives have implications for young women bodies and their reproductive behavior. While adolescent women are used to relying on the traditional role of motherhood to elevate their status, political economic conditions in the slum are reshaping these cultural ideals and financial constraints can sometimes take precedence over childbearing.

Gender tensions, powerlessness combined with economic pressures are reshaping childbearing roles of young women. Both Bina and Rashida had love marriages and are eager to have children. However, in their case, unpaid dowry and present political economic conditions in the household created tensions and spouses and

in-laws placed greater stress on their productivity in the market economy, rather than on motherhood. Both Dolly's and Maliya's cases, reveal the combined effects of poverty, social inequalities and limited resources exacerbated by polygamy, which impact on reproductive health behavior. Traditions and cultural ideals of fertility and childbearing are constantly challenged and re-molded by disparities, and for many young women, socially acceptable roles of motherhood are crumbling and they face greater insecurity and loss of identity in this new, changing and unpredictable environment. I demonstrate in this paper that the situations in which poor urban adolescent women make fertility decisions are within the socio-cultural, political and economic constraints that surround them, and the larger structural conditions that govern their lives.

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[i] Cain [1977] found in rural areas that families wanted sons, as sons could work and support rural parents.
[ii] Termination is a sensitive topic - women underreport.
[iii] See Susheela Singh., Deirdre Wulf and Heidi Jones [1997] and Bankole, A., Singh S., and Haas T. [1998].
[iv] In Bangladesh, abortion is legally restricted. There is the option of menstrual regulation which is the interim method of ensuring non-pregnancy for a woman at risk of being pregnant. The official policy is the resumption of menstruation and it is not regulated by the Bangladesh Penal Code, which restricts abortion.
[v] This is from 50 in-depths and case studies and 153 surveys. The shame associated with marital separations and polygamy means that it is underreported.
[vi] Sargent and Cordell [2003:1970] refer to 'pregnancy rivalry' among co-wives. See also, Barthelemy K.D. (1997); Ratcliffe, A.A., Hill, A.A., & Walraven, G. (2000); and Bankole, A., Singh, S., & Haas T, (1998) for discussions on 'disrupted reproduction.' Cain [1977] found in rural areas that families wanted sons, as sons could work and support rural parents.
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