

# **Influence of Spousal Age Difference on Fertility: A Study on Married Adolescent Girls in Bangladesh**

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## **Introduction**

Average spousal age difference in Bangladesh is still high. This influences the timing of pregnancy and has serious health consequences, especially among the married adolescent girls. This study aims to investigate this issue and hypothesises that the higher the spousal age difference the higher the fertility among the adolescent girls.

## **Data**

Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) 2007 dataset was used in this study. BDHS is a two-stage nationally representative survey which covers six administrative divisions and all the 64 districts. In rural areas *thanas* are divided into *unions* and then *mauzas*, a land administrative unit. Urban areas are divided into *wards* and then *mahallas*. A total of 361 primary sampling units (PSUs) were selected in the first stage of sampling including 227 rural PSUs and 134 urban PSUs. A household listing operation was carried out in all selected PSUs from January to March 2007. The resulting lists of households were used as the sampling frame for the selection of households in the second stage of sampling. On average, 30 households were selected from each PSU, using an equal probability systematic sampling technique. In this way, 10,819 households were selected for the sample. A total of 10146 currently married women aged 10-49 were selected and interviewed. A sub-sample (N=1294) of currently married women aged less than 20 years was created which was the basis of this study.

## **Methods**

Descriptive and bi-variate analyses were carried out to understand the sample characteristics. Furthermore, this study used a Poisson regression model to identify if the spousal age difference has any significant effect on the fertility among the married adolescent girls. The dependent variable was children ever born. The key independent variable, spousal age difference was categorised in to four categories as i) less than or

equal to 5 years, ii) 6-10 years, iii) 11-15 years, and iv) 16 years and above. Other independent variables considered were education, religion, wealth index, area of residence and division.

## **Results**

The data analysis suggests that 43.5% of the married adolescent girls were aged less than 18 years, the legal age at marriage for girls in Bangladesh. About 22.3% of the married adolescent girls had spousal age difference 5 years or less. Another 49.3% had spousal age difference between 6 to 10 years. A Poisson regression model revealed that age difference between spouses has significant influence on fertility. The relative risk of having children among adolescent girls with spousal age difference less than or equal to 5 years was 0.554 compared to the adolescents with spousal age difference more than 15 years. The relative risk increased to 0.730 and 0.835 respectively for spousal age differences between 6-10 and 11-15 years. Other important predictors of fertility were wealth index, husband's education, and religion.

## **Conclusion**

Childhood marriage for girls, especially in rural Bangladesh is still prevailing despite many legal and financial efforts by the government. In most of these cases the age difference between spouses remains high. These married adolescents do not have proper knowledge about family planning and reproductive health matters. Again, due to huge age difference husbands become dominant over many of the reproductive health decisions. As the study suggests that fertility is higher for higher age difference between the spouses, adolescent girls are more vulnerable to reproductive health complications. In Bangladesh there are campaigns to increase the marital age for girls as well as boys but no such efforts to highlight the negative impact of spousal age difference on fertility, consequently on reproductive health of the adolescent girls, are evident. Such an issue should be incorporated in the on going family planning and reproductive health program with proper intervention through mass media. Increasing husband's education level and awareness about reproductive health may help the process. As a whole these steps will influence the fertility of the adolescent girls in Bangladesh.