

The Effect of Divorce on Child Survival in a Rural Area of Bangladesh

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INTRODUCTION

Marriage is almost universal in Bangladesh. The patriarchal social system moves a woman socially and physically from her natal home to her husband's. Women's links with their natal families are maintained through occasional visits from both sides (Abdullah 1974; Chaudhury and Ahmed 1980; Ahmed and Naher 1987). Muslim family law allows a daughter to inherit her parents' property (Siddique undated; Chaudhury and Ahmed 1980). In case of marital disruption or crisis, she may return to her parental home. However, such a return to the parental home may not be regarded as respectable by the community, and may be difficult if parents are deceased or in poverty. There is no genuine alternative for women other than marriage (Roy 1994). Thus, it is expected that every attempt is made by parents to prepare their daughters to be good wives to their husbands. As many of the families in rural Bangladesh are extended families, a bride must be prepared to take care of her in-laws. In a new environment in the groom's home, a bride who is quite often in her teens, needs to adjust to every individual in the household in addition to demands from her husband to keep her marriage alive. All brides are expected to try their best to make their marriage a success (Arens and van Burden 1985). Some, however, fail and eventually end their marriage by divorce.

There are many reasons for divorce (Chaudhury and Ahmed 1980; RDRS 1990). In many cases the causes and processes of divorce may not be peaceful and, whatever the cause, divorce may indicate extreme psychological and physical oppression of the woman during her married life. In a patriarchal society where women are especially vulnerable, divorce can increase their vulnerability in the absence of institutional social support. Thus, divorce may have direct consequences for their own welfare, and for the well-being of their offspring. However, these consequences are not well documented. This paper sets out to remedy this situation by studying a marriage cohort in Matlab, a rural area in Bangladesh.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study area and population

The villages studied are in Matlab and Daudkandi *thana* (sub-district) situated 40-50 km south-east of Dhaka. The area supports subsistence farming in a low-lying deltaic plain. As in most other parts of rural Bangladesh, the majority of the population studied are poor. Farming is the dominant occupation, except in a few villages where fishing is the principal activity. Women are not in waged employment: more than 95 per cent are engaged in household work. Only 50 per cent of the males and 30 per cent of the females aged 6 years or older can read or write (Ahmed et al. 1994).

Since 1977, in half of the study area, intensive MCH-FP services have been provided by ICDDR, B. The other half had to rely on government-provided services. During the study period there were no other intensive development activities in the area.

Data and procedures

Data for this study were collected from 149 villages through the Demographic Surveillance System (DSS) of the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR,B). The DSS began in 1966 by registering births, deaths, and migration and extended its activities to study divorce from 1975. This paper is based on information collected between 1975 and 1989. Data collection procedures involved regular visits to households by a team of 110 female workers to collect information on births, deaths, marriages and divorces, and migration. The team was supervised by members of ICDDR,B. Every demographic event was registered in a prescribed form that contained the identification numbers of individuals and that of some of their relatives. This allowed linking individuals to relevant events and other DSS data sets. A detailed description of the DSS has been provided elsewhere (Cholera Research Laboratory 1978; D'Souza 1984).

All first marriages that occurred in the study villages between 1975 and 1987 among Muslims who did not leave the area within the first eleven months of marriage were included in this study. (Most – 85 per cent – of the population are Muslim and the remainder Hindus. Divorce is very rare among Hindus.) The couples were linked with records of births, deaths, out-migration, and divorce, to create a longitudinal event history. In addition, various kinds of socio-demographic information were obtained from other relevant DSS files.

Methods of analysis

Univariate and multivariate analytical techniques were used to examine the relationship of child survival to mother's marital status (divorced or not). The net effect of mother's marriage dissolution on the subsequent survival of live born children was assessed separately for infant and childhood deaths. Logit analysis was carried out for infants after adjustment for out-migration. A discrete time hazard logit analysis was carried out to assess the impact of marriage dissolution on childhood mortality, between the ages of one and four years, following the procedures proposed by Allison (1982). The time segment was a one-year unit. Children who migrated out during a specific time segment were excluded from this and subsequent segments. Children who had died in the previous segment were excluded from subsequent segments. A mother was considered divorced throughout if she was divorced before the death of the child. All the independent variables were categorized and deviation-coding schemes were used in logit regression analysis (Forthofer and Lehnen 1981).

The variables

Only marriage disruption caused by divorce was considered in this analysis. The DSS considered a woman to be divorced if her husband had either uttered the word *talak* three times in the presence of at least three male witnesses (a most common form of divorce) or had formally done so in a court or before a marriage registrar. It is very unusual for a wife to divorce her husband in rural Bangladesh.

In the multivariate analysis divorce was a dichotomized variable. Mother's education was defined by years of schooling and was categorized into 0–3 years, 1–5 years, and 6 or more years. Area was defined in terms of residence in or outside

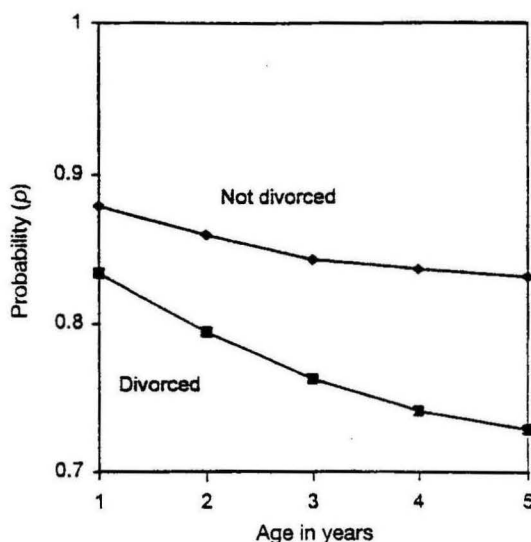


Figure 1. Life-table probability of survival of children by mother's marital status.

of ICDDR,B's health and family planning intervention villages, and used as a dichotomized variable in the multivariate analysis.

Year of pregnancy termination was categorized into three: 1975–79, 1980–84, and 1985–89, representing the intensity of the MCH-FP programme in one half of the study area, which was lower to begin with and gradually increased.

RESULTS

A total of 16,377 first marriages were registered among the residents in the study villages during 1975–87, but only 11,951 of them have been used for the present analysis. The excluded cases were Hindus and women who had not had a live birth or had migrated out within eleven months of marriage. In the marriages followed up, 896 divorces occurred before the child was five years old. Divorces experienced after the death of a child were also excluded.

Divorce and child survival

Presented in Figure 1 is the life table probability of survival of children to the fifth birthday by mother's marital status irrespective of whether the divorce occurred before or after the child's death. Chances of survival were always lower for children of divorced mothers than for those of non-divorced mothers. The gap widened with increasing age. Crude risk of death during infancy and childhood by mother's marital status and other independent

Table 1. Risk of death of first live birth during infancy and childhood by mother's marital status and other independent variables

Independent variables	Infancy		Childhood (1-4 years)	
	Number exposed	Risk of death	Child-year	Risk of death
Marital status of mother		$p = 0.000$		$p = 0.007$
Divorced	238	0.340	1,802	0.036
Not divorced	11,713	0.133	35,015	0.025
Education of mother		$p = 0.000$		$p = 0.000$
None	8,381	0.148	25,284	0.029
1-5 years	2,575	0.115	8,416	0.021
6+	995	0.102	3,117	0.014
Year of birth		$p = 0.000$		$p = 0.000$
1975-79	2,315	0.161	6,868	0.039
1980-84	4,917	0.146	14,592	0.035
1985-89	4,719	0.115	15,357	0.010
Area		$p = 0.036$		$p = 0.000$
MCH-FP	5,879	0.130	18,549	0.022
Comparison	6,072	0.143	18,268	0.030
Age of mother at birth		$p = 0.000$		$p = 0.002$
< 20 years	3,224	0.157	9,720	0.028
20-24	7,224	0.136	22,267	0.026
25+	1,503	0.097	4,830	0.019
Sex of child		$p = 0.027$		$p = 0.000$
Male	6,107	0.143	18,750	0.020
Female	5,844	0.130	18,067	0.031

Table 2. Results of hazard logistic regression analysis of death during infancy and childhood and mother's status of marriage controlling the effects of other independent variables

Independent variables	Infancy		Childhood (1-4 years)	
	b_i	Odds ratio	b_i	Odds ratio
Marital status of mother	$p = 0.000$		$p = 0.025$	
Divorced	0.581	3.20	0.150	1.35
Not divorced	-0.581	RC	-0.150	RC
Education of mother	$p = 0.000$		$p = 0.000$	
None	0.226	1.47	0.397	2.20
1-5 years	-0.064	1.10	-0.007	1.47
6+ years	-0.162	RC	-0.390	RC
Year of birth	$p = 0.001$		$p = 0.000$	
1975-79	0.103	1.30	0.596	4.79
1980-84	0.058	1.24	0.374	3.83
1985-89	-0.161	RC	-0.970	RC
Area	$p = 0.106$		$p = 0.000$	
MCH-FP	-0.043	RC	-0.154	RC
Comparison	0.043	1.09	1.54	1.36
Age of mother at birth	$p = 0.000$		$p = 0.004$	
< 20	0.178	1.53	-0.185	RC
20-24	0.069	1.37	0.069	1.29
25+	-0.247	RC	0.116	1.35
Sex of child	$p = 0.012$		$p = 0.000$	
Male	0.068	1.15	-0.220	RC
Female	-0.068	RC	0.220	1.55
Constant	-1.493***		-3.846***	
Model χ^2 , 9 d.f.	149.85***		419.43***	

*** $p < 0.001$.

Note. RC = reference category.

variables are presented in Table 1. The results of a hazard logit regression analysis of the group can be seen in Table 2.

The results of univariate and multivariate analysis of child survival and mothers' marital status were somewhat similar. All the independent

factors. It needs to be recognized that divorced women and their children in this society are the most vulnerable of the vulnerable, and deserve special attention both in terms of intervention and research.

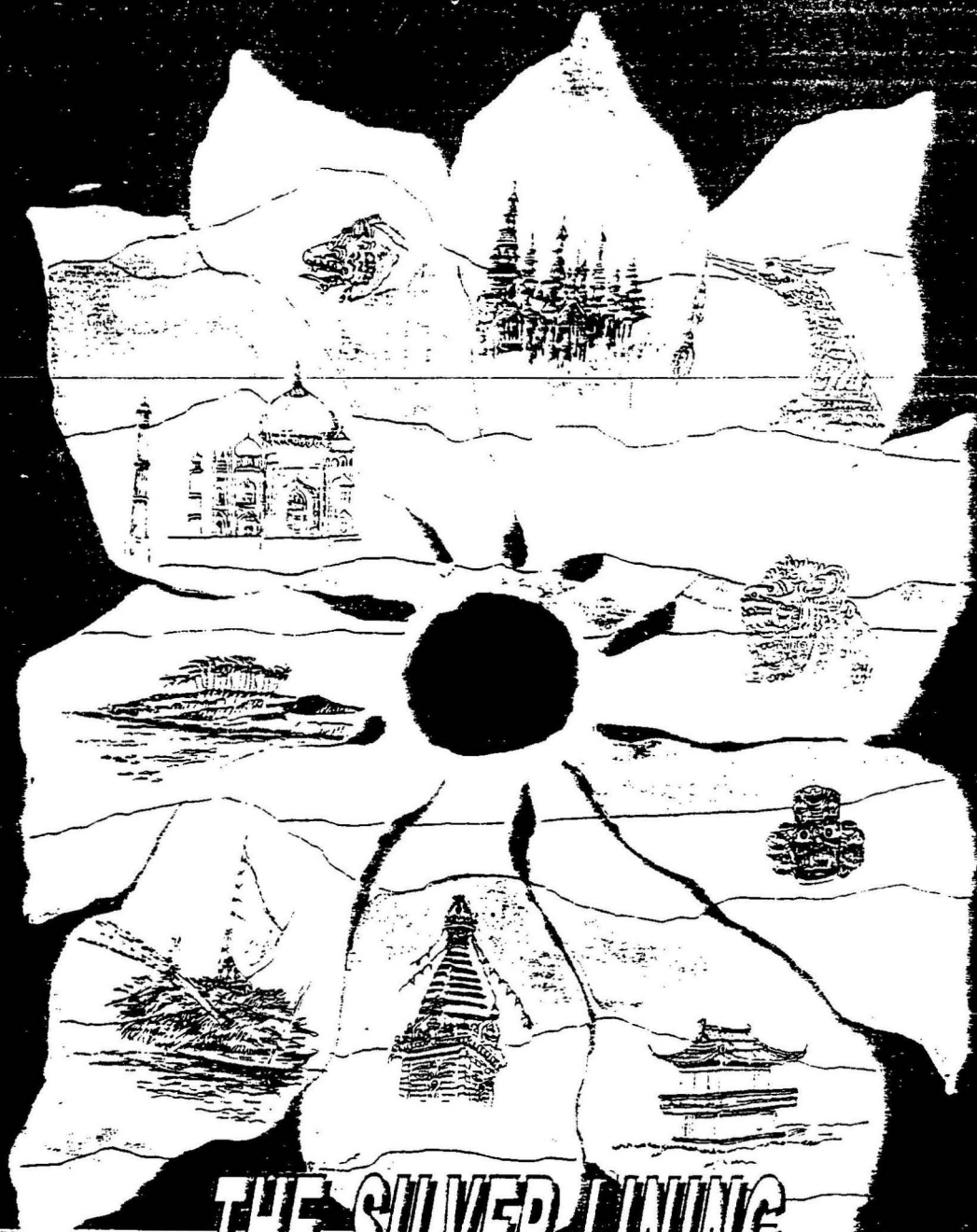
NOTES

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