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Becoming a Woman in Silence
Studies on preparedness for reproductive life of young women in Pakistan

ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Background: According to the cultural tradition in Pakistan, young women belonging to poor families should marry shortly after menarche. However, existing data show that young people, especially women, are not prepared for sexual life and have poor knowledge about sexuality and reproductive health. Many of the difficulties young women experience are related to beliefs and expectations in the society related to their reproductive roles making them more vulnerable to reproductive ill health.

Aim: The study explores the preparedness of young women for married life (communicating with spouse, initiation of sexual activity and child bearing) and ability to negotiate in marriage with spouse on number of children to have and on contraceptive use.

Methods: In order to obtain an in-depth understanding of young women's lives qualitative and quantitative approaches were used. Three qualitative studies using narrative and content analysis were carried out in a slum setting in the outskirts of Islamabad city in Pakistan. Married young women (I), unmarried young women (II) and parents (III) were selected with the help of a community worker. Young married women were interviewed three times at different occasions. Narrative structuring was used to explore how the participants represented their situation. In addition twenty qualitative interviews and three focus group discussions were conducted with young unmarried women (II). Twenty-five parents participated in four gender specific focus group discussions (III). Content analysis was used for analysis of study II and III. For the quantitative study (IV), a subset of 1803 married young women aged 15-24 years was drawn from a nationally representative adolescent and youth survey conducted in Pakistan in 2001-2002 by the Population Council. Regression models were used for analysing the following outcomes: reported agreement with spouse on the number of children to have, current use of contraceptives, intention to use contraceptives in the future and the time elapsed between marriage and the first contraceptive use. Key co-variables of interest were variables that measure the involvement of young women in their marriage as having a say in selection of spouse, mobility outside the household, social role and decision making in their homes.

Results: The main theme in all the qualitative studies was 'socialisation of young women into submissiveness'. For the married young women two themes were identified a) *submissive-accepting* and b) *submissive-victims*. The married young women who belonged to the accepting group lived under compromised conditions but described themselves as satisfied with their situation. Women belonging to the victimized group experienced physical and verbal abuse for their inability to cope with the duties of a wife, caretaker of the home and bearer of children. Their situation was compounded by the power dynamics within the household (I). For the unmarried young women the main theme identified was *security lies in obedience*. The two sub-themes contributing to the main theme were *socialisation into submissiveness* and *transition into adulthood in silence* (II). The theme and the sub-themes illustrate the situation of young women in a poor setting in Pakistan. The main theme identified in the study with the parents was '*Good parents' strive to raise 'innocent daughters'*'. The three sub-themes contributing to the main theme were: *a daughter - a responsibility and a burden, social and sexual innocence* and *parents' roles in the preparation for marriage*. The theme and the sub-themes illustrate how the parents saw themselves as responsible for raising 'innocent daughters' and arranging good marriages (III). The quantitative study on the married young women showed that having a say in the selection of spouse at the time of marriage was significantly associated with agreeing with spouse over the number of children to have, intention to use contraceptives and the time between marriage and first contraceptive use. These relationships existed after controlling for education, socioeconomic status, mobility outside of house and decision making in the home (IV).

Conclusions: In a culture of silence around sexuality, young women's socialisation into submissiveness lays the foundation for the lack of control over their future reproductive health (I and II). The parents realised, though, that bringing up daughters for marriage requires not only obedience, but also building confidence and knowledge during their childhood (III). Women who had decision making freedom in their parental home carried this ability with them into marriage in their new home and were better able to negotiate about their fertility (IV). Knowledge about reproductive life could prepare young women better for the future life and give them more control of their fertility. Innovative interventions targeting women need to challenge current societal norms of womanhood to promote the upbringing of confident and knowledgeable young women.

Key words: sexuality, marriage of young women, obedience, upbringing, youth, married women, Pakistan