

Reproductive health care challenges for married female university students in Bangladesh

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Reproductive health is important for all women; but it remains a major challenge, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Bangladesh has made significant progress in health and family welfare. However, lack of access and availability of care with respect to reproductive and sexual health remains a concern. In 2011, one-third population of Bangladesh had 10–19 years of age with nearly equal number of boy and girls, and about two-thirds of girls were married off before reaching an age of 18 years.¹ Lack of information and awareness regarding services, fear of social stigma, poor reproductive health literacy, and gender violence mount the challenges. This situation is not very different even for married female university students of the country because of archaic university regulations.

Since independence in 1971, married female students in Bangladesh were not allowed to stay in the residential halls of university due to a rule imposed by the university while allocating the seats. We could not identify the exact year when this practice began but perhaps it would have existed long before independence. Students were directed to notify hall authority if they got married during the study period which resulted in cancellation of their seats with exception to special occasions.^{2,3} In December 2021, University of Dhaka (apex university of Bangladesh) asked married female students to vacate their seats after indentifying a married female student staying at the hall in violation of rules.^{2,3} This news raised criticism from university students as well as the public. Subsequently, a legal notice was served to the university emphasising that all persons are equal as per the Constitution of the country and it is unjust to discriminate citizens on the basis of religion, gender or place of birth.³ In response to the legal notice and strong protests by university students, the university finally abolished its rule in December 2021.

Another, traumatic incident at Jahangirnagar University (a residential university in Dhaka) hit the headlines in March 2019. A student after giving birth to a child in the hall hid the baby in a trunk.⁴ She was staying at the hall to attend her exams even though her expected delivery date was close to the last exam date. After her marriage, she stayed in the hall-room in an irregular fashion, and she managed to hide her marriage and pregnancy in the university hall, even from her roommates. When she developed labour pain, she was alone in the room, became frightened and delivered a baby. Although, she hid the baby inside a trunk, her room-mate disclosed it later by identifying the blood. Later on, the baby and mother were transferred to a nearby private hospital where the baby died. The studentships of both the student and her husband were temporarily cancelled following this incident. To the best of our knowledge, the husband returned to his studentship after a legal battle in the High Court; however, the woman is still struggling.

Abolishing the practice of barring the married female university students is a landmark step in empowering the education and reproductive healthcare in Bangladesh. In a country with enduring practice of child marriage, barring hall stay of the married and pregnant females certainly hampers the physical and mental health of mothers, affects early development of children, education, and empowerment of mothers, and ultimately impacts the growth and development of a society. In addition, the university medical centres should have well-equipped corners for emergency reproductive health services. Government authorities (Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health) should take necessary actions for collaborative support to ensure an education that would empower women. Such restrictions might discourage early marriage and pregnancy and hence sound beneficial. However, it could lead to higher incidences of university drop-outs. It is important to have a well laid national policy and an action plan that addresses the needs of the women's reproductive health whether they are working or studying and staying away from family. Simultaneously, there is a need to intensively monitor the implementation of such policies and action plans so that every woman can enjoy safe motherhood along with their study.

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Declaration of interests

None.

Contributions

S M Yasir Arafat: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft. **Sujita Kumar Kar:** Writing – review & editing.

Russell Kabir: Writing – review & editing.

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