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**Conjugal Relations and Stepchildren's Wellbeing: Exploring the Experiences of Remarried  
Women in Sylhet, Bangladesh**

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## **Conjugal Relations and Stepchildren's Well-being: Exploring the Experiences of Remarried Women in Sylhet, Bangladesh**

### **Abstract**

Drawing on qualitative research in Sylhet, Bangladesh, this article explores the patterns of conjugal relations of remarried women who have children from previous marriage(s). We are primarily concerned here with the potential impacts of remarriage for women and children's well-being. Regardless of gendered identity, it continues to be the case that the majority of Bangladeshi people are married only once. However, remarriage and polygamy are not uncommon, and this tends to be particularly the case among people living in poverty. This study is based on ethnographic observation and life history interviews with 12 remarried women from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. Drawing on this data, we argue that remarriage can render custodian mothers' lives more difficult through the complex negotiation between the needs and desires of their new husbands versus the well-being of their children. The socio-cultural structure of Bangladesh continues to be framed by specifically located patriarchy. In this context women's remarriage challenges normative conjugal relations and the resulting intrafamilial negotiations can adversely affect both mothers' and children's well-being.

**Keywords: remarriage, stepfamily, conjugal relation, well-being, children**

### **Introduction**

The heteronormative institution of marriage continues to be of critical socio-cultural and economic significance in Bangladeshi society for both men and women (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS henceforth), 2015)<sup>1</sup>. Marriage remains, however, a highly gendered domain, and holds particular socio-cultural significance for women, to the extent that unmarried women can be deemed 'incomplete'. Many women are married by the age of 19, with the mean age of first

marriage reported as 17.5 for women and 23.9 for men in the 2011 census (BBS, 2015). Women and men who never marry constitute a fractional percentage of the population—less than 2% according to the 2011 census (BBS, 2015)—and tend to be confined to urban centers (Chowdhury, 2000). Moreover, it remains the case that, regardless of gendered identity, an overwhelming majority of Bangladeshi people are married only once (Choudhury, 2014; BBS, 2015). Remarriage and polygamy are not entirely uncommon, particularly among poorer sectors of society. However, accurate data for the actual statistics are not available as many marriages are not registered.

Over the past two decades Bangladeshi society has seen some major socioeconomic transformations, particularly as growing numbers of women are engaged in paid employment outside the home (Kabeer, 2000; BBS, 2015). Trends in the Bangladesh Labour Force Surveys between 2010 and 2016-17 indicate that women's labour force participation has increased from 11.3 million in 2005-06 to 19.8 in 2016-17 (BBS, 2018). The increased visibility of women as economic contributors has in some cases been linked, for a variety of reasons, to higher divorce, desertion and remarriage rates among Bangladeshi women (BBS, 2018). For men of all social classes it is predominantly the death of a partner or dissolution of marriage that constitutes the basis of remarriage, but for women socio-economic status is an important factor in the decision to remarry. For women in a relatively secure economic position, remaining single after the demise of a partner or dissolution of marriage is traditionally widely valued (Chowdhury, 2000). Furthermore, remarriage for a woman can be a particularly difficult decision if she has children. Socio-cultural norms dictate that mothers should sacrifice their own wellbeing in favor of their children's.

For many women, the fear that their children could suffer if they remarried leads them to remain single throughout their lives after divorce, desertion or widowhood. Alongside social expectations, the existing law in Bangladesh regarding children's custody plays an important role in shaping women's decision about remarriage. Here Muslim personal law dictates that the father is the 'natural' legal guardian of children from the marriage, with mothers being deemed the custodian of minors (up to 7 years of age for boys and until puberty for girls). Although there are some indications of trends towards a more child welfare-based approach to judicial decisions in cases of child custody disputes, whereby the welfare of the child plays a greater role in determining domicile with the mother or under a joint custody arrangement (Yasmin, 2017, p. 223), it remains the *de jure* case that upon remarriage of the mother, legal custody defers to the child's father. Nevertheless the *de facto* situation in terms of the domicile of children from first marriages is more complex than might initially be understood, and it may not always be the case that children leave their mother's care and reside with their father upon her remarriage, as would be the case in accordance with traditional Muslim law.

However, the decision to remarry or not remains particularly difficult for women with children, aware as they are that they could lose custody upon remarriage. This can be particularly so for women from poorer sectors of society for whom the decision is embroiled in complex negotiations between economic and socio-cultural factors. Resource-poor or socio-economically marginalized women are more likely to encounter multiple forms of insecurity as a single woman in a patriarchal society and as such may resort to remarriage to seek male protection. Hence, as a consequence both of custodian mothers' remarriage and the complexity in forms of inter and intra familial custodial decision making, a relatively small but growing number of children live in stepfamilies in Bangladesh (Islam et al., 2016).

It is of course important to state that there are diverse reasons for the dissolution of a marriage, and for many couples, and for their children, that dissolution may well be a welcome shift towards a brighter future, particularly in the case of intra-familial conflict. Nevertheless, as a range of research conducted globally has explored (see for example, Smock, 1994; Jeynes, 1998a; Poortman, 2000; Amato, 2010; Sweeney, 2010; Amato & Kane, 2011), marital dissolution, due to divorce, widowhood, or separation can negatively impact the well-being of parents and children. In this vein, several studies, conducted mainly in the USA, have argued that children in stepfamilies are more likely to have poorer academic achievement and school completion rates, poorer psychological adjustment and behavioral problems (Dawson, 1991; Jeynes, 1998b; Amato & Sobolewski, 2000; Stroschein, Roos, & Brownell, 2009). To date there has been a relative paucity of research pertaining specifically to remarried women and their children's wellbeing in stepfamilies in the context of Bangladesh. However, of the extant research three notable such studies are those of Smith, Carrasco and McDonald (1984), whose work focuses on marriage dissolution and remarriage in 27 countries, including Bangladesh; Alam, Saha and Ginneken (2000), who explore the effects of spouses' prior marital status and socio-demographic characteristics on the risk of divorce within Muslim marriages; and Islam et al.'s (2016) more recent study on the prevalence and determinants of remarriage. Our study builds on these analyses with a particular focus on the well-being of both custodian mothers and their children in the context of intrafamilial changes following remarriage.

## **Methods**

Based on in-depth qualitative research carried out with 12 resource-poor remarried women in Sylhet, Bangladesh in 2018, we investigate the patterns of conjugal relations of this small group

of women who have children from a previous marriage and explore children's wellbeing in their stepfamilies. We focus on these complex intrafamilial dynamics through an analysis of women's perceptions and experiences of domestic gender relations. The participant women were selected purposively through a support center for mothers where poorer women's children receive informal education. The criteria of selection were principally their remarried status with domicile children from a previous relationship, but we also considered participant's age, place of origin, and, of course, their willingness to talk to us. Through life history interviews and ethnographic observation, we listened to women talk about the attitudes and behaviors (actual and perceived) of the new husband and stepfather, as well as the prevalence of domestic violence, incidences of child abuse and these women's everyday struggles for survival. All the interviews were audio recorded with the informed consent of the participants and were subsequently transcribed.

The 12 remarried women who consented to participate in this study belonged to different age groups, ranging from their early 20s to mid-50s, and were originally from various regions of Bangladesh but living in Sylhet at the time of the research in 2018. All names used here are self-selected pseudonyms. Our participants were from resource-poor backgrounds (their monthly income varies from \$60 to \$150) and they had not accessed any prior formal education. All except one had first married before the official marriageable age of 18. When our participants were married for the second time, two had been widowed, two had been divorced and eight had been deserted by their first husband. It emerged from the stories of our participants that their first husbands did not discharge their culturally delegated male responsibilities as providers and all our participants reported that domestic violence was a regular occurrence in their households. Within a year of dissolution of their first marriage, all the participants had remarried. In their second marriage, only three participants had been taken to visit their new husbands' ancestral

home and meet their in-laws. This speaks volumes about the status of these second wives, as visiting one's husband's ancestral home and meeting his family members are of critical importance in the context of Bangladesh, where marriage is viewed as a social bond between two families, rather than a tie merely between husband and wife (Chowdhury, 2000).

Of the 12 participants, three had more than five children, four had children from both marriages, four had one child from their previous marriage and the rest had two or more children. At the time of second marriage, only three participants were aware of their husband's first marriage and seven others claimed that their husbands hid the fact about their previous marriage. The majority of these women were engaged in manual labor either as construction workers or domestic helpers and were the main breadwinners of their families as their husbands did not make a regular financial contribution to the household. The husbands of our participants had also been involved in manual labor; they were working as construction workers, casual laborers, rikshaw pullers and so on.

### **The Remarriage-Wellbeing<sup>2</sup> Nexus**

As studies conducted in different geographical and cultural contexts reveal, understandings and experiences of remarriage are extraordinarily complex, with shifting familial relations, marital histories, and the presence (or absence) of children of both partners from previous relationships (see for example, Cherlin, 1978; Amato, 1988, 1993; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Jeynes, 1998a; Fincham, 2003; Anderson & Greene, 2013). As indicated above, over the past several decades, a range of studies conducted largely in the US and European contexts has examined the implications of parental marital disruption for children's academic achievement, psychological adjustment and self-esteem. It is not our intention here to provide a detailed account of

international research in the field; it suffices to say here that there are both contrasting views and mixed results from extant data as to the impacts of remarriage on children's wellbeing. Four such studies represent a flavor of the range of these debates: Peterson and Zill (1986) argue that parental remarriage can benefit children by providing them with a second parent, greater economic resources and the promise of some stability in living arrangements. Jensen et al's (2018) more recent study also demonstrates that the process of developing stepparent-child relationships takes time, but a stepparent's love, warmth and support can reduce children's anxieties. A more recent study conducted with African American youth by Adler-Baeder et al. (2010) finds no differences between remarried and intact families in terms of children's wellbeing. However, Shafer, Jensen and Holmes (2017)) argues that children in stepfamilies encounter more stresses and challenges in terms of family relations and personal adjustment. In the same vein, Jeynes (2006) and Turunen (2014) find that parental remarriage is negatively associated with children's psychological welfare and educational attainment, and, based on longitudinal data over 17-year period from the USA, Amato and Sobolewski (2001) suggest that children's psychological wellbeing can often be negatively affected by the number of marital transitions. Their research suggests that marital transitions can deteriorate the emotional bonds between parent and child which in turn can place adult offspring at greater risk of feelings of distress, low self-esteem and unhappiness

In the patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal social context of Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2000; Choudhury, 2014) under existing law, despite evidence of some shifts towards a more child welfare approach in cases of judicial dispute (Yasmin, 2017), women are not granted legal guardianship of their children. A woman can argue the case for the custody of her son until he is 7 years old and her daughter until she reaches puberty. However, the legal guardianship of

children lies with the father and if a woman remarries she can expect to formally lose custody of even her younger children. Thus, mothers generally gain *de facto* custody of children only if the fathers refuse to take the children into paternal custody as it is perceived as 'natural' for a father's children to live with him after his remarriage. As such, in cases where the father refuses domicile care of his children after marital breakdown, the children who continue to live with their mother following her remarriage can often have a low status and poorer living conditions because their familial context violates normative codes of culturally prescribed living arrangements. When a custodian father remarries, social expectations are that his new wife would take care of her husband's children but there is no such expectation or demand placed on the husband of a custodian mother. This sociocultural system from the very beginning creates an uncomfortable situation between stepfather and stepchildren. In line with studies conducted by Flinn (1999), Mecos, Hetherington and Reiss (1996), and Coleman, Ganong and Fine (2000) in the US and European contexts, in this study we argue that given the social context, relations between stepfather and stepchildren are more likely to be conflictual and that, ultimately, this intrafamilial conflict can have a deleterious effect both on the conjugal relations of a custodian mother and for the wellbeing of her children.

A range of international research has evidenced that after divorce or dissolution of marriage, women and their custodial children are more likely to experience a marked decline in economic position due to lower labor market participation, limited earnings when they are engaged in paid employment, and sole responsibilities for taking care of the children (Hoffman & Duncan, 1988; Sweeney, 1997; Bianchi, Subaiya, & Kahn, 1999; Dewilde & Uunk, 2008). In these circumstances, women may consider remarriage as a route for coping with financial stress and to enhance physical and psychological wellbeing (Smith, Zick, & Duncan, 1991; Casper et

al., 1994; Portman, 2000; Smock, 2000; Dewilde & Uunk, 2008; Jansen, 2009; Amato, 2010). Similarly, in Bangladesh, poorer women's financial hardship plays an important catalytic role in shaping their decision about remarriage, leading poorer women to seek remarriage in the hopes of finding greater socioeconomic security, which in turn they hope would support their children's wellbeing.

In Bangladeshi society men are culturally responsible for providing for their family members and maintaining their security as the formal guardian. However, several studies have demonstrated that economic impoverishment leads many men to reject their culturally designated 'provisioning role' (Kabeer, 1997; Kibria, 1995; Choudhury, 2013, 2014; Choudhury & Clisby, 2018). Increasingly men feel reluctant or unable to provide for their dependents and, as such, more and more women take up paid employment outside the home and can no longer rely on what Kandiyoti (1988) refers to as the 'patriarchal bargain'. For Kandiyoti (1988) the patriarchal bargain is one in which women "forego economically advantageous options [...] for alternatives that are perceived as in keeping with their respectable and protected domestic roles, and so they become more exploitable." We argue that poorer women who remarry with the hope that in so doing they gain access to the patriarchal bargain often find that such bargain is a myth. We also contend that in conjunction with their economic well-being, their physical and mental well-being are compromised as they find that their home is not the source of "comfort and security, but all too often [...] a site of fear, abuse and violence" (Clisby & Holdsworth, 2014, p. 30).

### **Wife or Mother? Familial Expectations and (Hetero)normativity**

As stated earlier, in recent decades Bangladesh has undergone some quite radical social transformations—not least in terms of the numbers of women now employed in visibly

productive work in the public sphere. Concurrently the rate of divorce and separation has almost doubled over the last two decades (Dommaraju & Jones, 2011; BBS, 2017). One might speculate that economic independence affords women greater options, but may also create greater conjugal conflict, but this debate is not our focus here. While it is socially acceptable for men to remarry, this not the case for all women. Women from wealthier backgrounds with children can find it particularly difficult to remarry as societal norms dictate that they should sacrifice their own wellbeing in favor of their children (inferring that remarriage would not benefit stepchildren). However, for socio-economically disadvantaged women there is an assumption of greater vulnerability and as such there is an expectation that these women should remarry, whether with children or not, largely so they are not an economic burden to other family members. As one of our participants, Kochi, narrated, she felt significant social pressure to remarry but the subsequent marriage did not facilitate her access to the patriarchal bargain:

I did not want to get married again but my family members, friends, male co-workers and neighbors were continuously nagging me to marry once again. Especially my brothers' wives were very insistent. They did not want to extend any support to me and my son. In fact, they were very anxious that I would demand support from them as I was a mother of a young child and a young woman without a man. I tried to convince them that I would not be dependent on them as I was able to earn a modest living for my son and myself but they said I needed a man for my overall well-being. I had to surrender because of their unrelenting pressure. Even though I got married, I earn my living, my husband does not feed me. However, my sisters in law are now relieved! (Kochi, 33, mother of a 9-year-old boy)

Sufia also described how social expectations played an important role in shaping her decisions:

After the bad experience of my first marriage, I did not want to remarry. But my co-workers kept asking me about my husband, cracked jokes and some of them even showed interest to mitigate my loneliness! My neighbors also repeatedly told me it was not easy for a young woman to live safely in a slum without a husband. In the midst of all this I met my second husband who made nice promises and I just could not say “no” to him. (Sufia, 33, mother of 5 children)

Our other participants also reiterated the common concern expressed by their friends, family and neighbors, that it was very difficult for a woman to live without a husband in urban slums. Several of our participants were not very keen on remarriage as they were concerned about the future of their children from first marriage. The women were aware that their children from first marriages might not be treated well in their new marital homes. However, anxieties about old age, economic insecurity and social pressure led them to seek male protection. Their view was that, in line with socio-cultural norms, a woman needed male protection to lead a ‘normal’, socially acceptable, life. To live beyond the bounds of this social acceptability could incur social penalties. For example, all our participants told us that it was very difficult to rent a house without a husband, even though they were earning their own living. In Bangladesh, it continues to be the case that it is practically impossible for a woman to secure a loan from credit agencies if she does not have a husband—a woman without a husband is often seen as a woman of questionable character. Our participants’ narratives clearly demonstrated that societal pressure was so profound and persistent that they themselves had devalued their capacity to survive on their own—even in cases where they knew they were and clearly had been

economically self-sufficient—and they concurred that it was necessary for them to ultimately succumb to the pressure of seeking male ‘protection’.

### **Remarried Women and Household Power Dynamics**

In his significant study of women’s roles and status in Bangladesh, Chowdhury (2000) notes that a woman has little or no right over the physical space of her husband’s house. Almost two decades later, our findings still resonate with those of Chowdhury and the situation is little changed. A newly-married woman is still expected to obey all her elders and abide by the decisions of her husband and mother-in-law. In most of the cases in our study, the women themselves had chosen their husbands, or at least agreed to the marriage, although in some cases, family members, co-workers and friends also played a part. While the women had limited voice in their first marriages, this was not the case in their subsequent marriages. Most of our participants had met their second husbands prior to marriage mainly at work and in the neighborhood, and they had discussed different issues before marriage took place. Even this negotiated marriage did not confer her the right over her marital house, as described by Sufia:

When I got married to my second husband, he presented himself as a kind, loving man but the good times faded very quickly. He told me he had no family except me, but after marriage I found he had a wife, children, mother and siblings. They did not want me to enter into the house; my children and I were hated by all. My mother-in-law took my husband’s first wife’s side. She often sets my husband against me and conflict is a regular occurrence in our household (Sufia, 33, mother of 5).

Similar to Sufia, other participants such as Fulbanu, Amena, Poppy, Beauty, Firoza, Farida and Meena were not only unwanted in their husband's house but had also never been offered the opportunity to visit their new husband's permanent residence. They either stayed in the same house where they had lived themselves before remarriage or moved to another rented house in a different poor neighborhood with their new husband. Their husbands routinely visited their ancestral<sup>3</sup> homes to meet their parents, siblings and/or first wife. Even in the rented house where they lived, these women had little control, as was illustrated by their husbands telling them to leave 'his house' when a conflict situation arose. In such situations, we were told, their husbands usually vented their anger on their wife's children from her first marriage and the attitude of the husband and his family was that these children were an unwanted burden who had no right to live in the house.

Ten of our participants were involved in paid employment and were the *de facto* breadwinners. Hence, these women not only supported themselves and their children, they also met the financial demands of their husbands. However, we found that our participants were unable to establish control over their own earnings as their husbands kept a tight hold over their finances. They explained that their husbands believed they clandestinely kept a portion of their earnings for their children from their first marriage, which exacerbated the husbands' authoritative and controlling manner. Previous studies by both Kabeer (1997) and Choudhury (2010) have demonstrated that when women spend money on their husband's biological offspring from their own earnings, men generally accept this. However, when men see their wives spending money on stepchildren, they can become hostile. In one illustration of these experiences, Amena explained how her second husband made all the decisions regarding her earnings:

I have to work for 14-15 hours a day in different houses as a domestic worker. Even after that I have no right to spend a single penny. As soon as I get my wages, he takes away all the money and I tolerate all this for the sake of my children. If I raise my voice against his misdeeds, he gets mad and one cannot even imagine the extent of heinous acts he commits against my children from my first marriage.” (Amena, 28, mother of 2 daughters)

Almost all our participants stated that they were unable to assert their rights in their new home and that their new husbands made all household and familial decisions regardless of their financial contribution to the household. Husbands were well aware of the socio-economic constraints placed upon their second wife. They used their power within this patriarchal context to their advantage to exert greater authority over the household. Our participants told us conflict was common in their homes and the presence of their children from their first marriage became a constant point of contestation. Time and again women were reminded that their children were unwanted, occupying the physical space of the house and eating up the hard-earned money (regardless of who was doing the earning). Indeed, feeding the children from the wife’s first marriage was a particularly contentious matter. These mothers were earning a living and in some cases their children were also contributing financially but this did not accord them the right to live peacefully. Moreover, most of our participants said that they did not feel safe leaving their daughters from their previous marriage at home without them due to the risk of violence from their stepfathers.

### **Women in Double Trouble**

Hence, according to our participants, the presence of children from previous marriages brought a layer of complexity and conflict to the process of adaption to the new marriage for both women and children. Fulbanu's account was interesting. Her second husband was "nicer" to her than her first husband, who was "not a good husband." She said that her second husband was more caring. For example, when he was with her, he oiled and combed her hair, they talked a lot and smiled like a "normal couple" and enjoyed each other's company. Fulbanu said she also cared for him and extended financial support to him in times of crisis as she had a regular income. Although Fulbanu felt that her husband and her children from first marriage were not in a bad relationship, following her remarriage her two daughters were sent to live and work as domestic helpers in affluent houses and her only son worked in a tea stall as a teaboy. Her son came home occasionally but her daughters did not. Fulbanu visited them in their employer's home. Although she had greater financial resources than many of the other participants, rather than sending them to school, she sent her children to live and work elsewhere. It seems she had deliberately kept her teenage daughters and son away from home to reduce any destabilizing influences they might have on her conjugal relationship in her new household. After a very troubled and abusive first marriage, Fulbanu wished for her second marriage to bring some sense of security, male protection (the patriarchal bargain), as well as happiness as a wife, and this was what her narration reflected.

However, when looked at more closely, this marriage did not appear to provide a great deal of social and financial security for several reasons: Fulbanu had to share her husband with his first wife, her status was as the subordinate wife, she was not acknowledged by her new in-laws, and her new husband only occasionally made a financial contribution to the household, all of which meant she had limited access to the 'patriarchal bargain' that she was seeking. While

most of our participants expressed a desire to send their children to school to ensure a better future for them, and they wanted to resist pressures to send them out to work for as long as they could, Fulbanu behaved differently. Although she commented that she was “not at all bothered if her husband left her in future,” her subsequent statements and actions led us to think that she was afraid of losing her husband and all her strategies regarding her children and husband were predominantly directed at keeping her husband happy and trying to ensure a relatively stress-free married life. It is important to understand the socio-cultural context of Fulbanu’s position, and to respect her survival strategies. Nevertheless, one could suggest that the wellbeing of both Fulbanu and her children were being compromised in her second marriage. Fulbanu’s rights as a wife and as mother were restricted, while her children’s rights to an education, to live in a secure family environment, to not be sent into child labor, or to make their own choices about their lives, were being severely constrained.

Linking back to Sufia’s comments about her experiences of conjugal conflict in her second marriage, her story goes on to illustrate a common experience for our participants: that of her second husbands’ attitude towards her children from first marriage. Her account revealed how her husband appeared to radically change his attitude towards her children from her first marriage. Before her remarriage, her husband claimed that he had no objection to her children living with them. However, after marriage he started expressing dissatisfaction over the presence of her children, and, after having two more children with her second husband, the intrafamilial conflict increased. Sufia said that her husband often complained about his stepchildren, arguing with her about how much of her earnings she spent on them, and shouting that they ate too much. She explained that he was putting a lot of pressure on her to send the children away to work and

she kept stressing that they were too young (6 and 8 years old). The stepchildren were a constant focus of his anger and this led to significant conjugal strain.

Sending children to work, spending money on children, the amount of food they consume and violence towards stepchildren were common issues of conflict. Indeed, according to our participants, these stepfathers frequently abused their children, both verbally and physically, but if the mothers protested their husbands became more aggressive. Our participants told us that they found it very difficult to comply with their husbands demands when they could clearly see that doing so negatively affected their children's wellbeing. They felt trapped between concern for their children and a concern for the maintenance of their second marriage.

Our participants eloquently expressed the desire to save their remarriages as they were well aware of the social penalties they would incur if they left their husbands. They explained that people around them would think badly of them and make adverse comments about them, that they would become social outcasts. They anticipated that no one would be interested in understanding the reasons why they "failed" to save their marriage and instead be accused of being morally "loose" given that most of had dissolved their first marriage (due to desertion by their husbands) which made them more anxious about the repercussions of a second failed marriage. In line with much of the extant research from wider global contexts conducted over the past few decades (for example, Dahl, Cowgill, & Asmundsson, 1987; Hetherington, 1989; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Anderson & Greene, 2013) we also found that remarriages placed different constraints on women which they negotiated and responded to in different ways. Some women, like Fulbanu, employed survival strategies including keeping their children away from the marital home to avoid tension and discord. Other participants struggled to simultaneously maintain their fragile remarriage while attempting to ensure their children's wellbeing in the face

of their husbands' resentment. No matter what strategies these women employed to mitigate the challenges of remarriage, they found themselves in a troubled double bind, as they could neither satisfy their husbands' expectations nor fulfil their maternal roles.

### **Conjugal Relations**

With the exception of one participant, Chayarun, all the women in this study expressed dissatisfaction with their second husband's behavior towards them and their children but all were well aware of the powerful socio-cultural pressures they were placed under to "save" their marriage. In Bangladesh women tend to be held responsible for maintaining a functioning household, while men's responsibility continues, at least normatively, to be that of economic provider (Choudhury, 2014). However, in this study we found that remarried women's husbands apparently felt less than enthusiastic about discharging these familial responsibilities towards their wives and stepchildren. Socio-cultural norms dictate that men have the right to marry whenever they wish and they can desert their wife (and children) without prior notification. In Bangladesh it is legal for men to marry another woman with the permission of his existing wife. However, women seldom give consent willingly. Men often use different strategies to get consent and if they do ask permission, a woman may not be able to object, given their own socio-economic constraints and their economic dependence on their spouses (Choudhury, 2014). Our participants believed that men get married again mainly for two reasons: one, they want to benefit financially by claiming dowry from the new wife and two, they find someone more attractive and do not want to have intimate relations with their existing wife anymore.

Thus, Bangladeshi men continue to have relative freedom to enter into or exit from conjugal and polygamous relations, while women do not have the same rights. As we saw

earlier, some of our participants' husbands had another family whom they regularly visited. This tended to weaken the bond with their additional wife. In some cases, we found that husbands would leave their remarried domicile to stay with their first wife for extended periods of time without informing their second wives. This was a source of anxiety for our participant wives as they were left not knowing when or if their husband would return. Sabena, for example, explained that her second husband left their house without telling her and she did not know whether he would return or when he would do so. She had a young child from her first marriage to support, so, after her husband's departure, she had to increase her working hours as a domestic worker to support her household.

In this small-scale study, only one participant, Chayarun (40, mother of 7), claimed that she was satisfied with her second marriage. She stated that her husband not only performed familial responsibilities but also took care of the children from her previous marriage. She explained that her husband did not allow her to work outside the home. Rather he himself worked very hard to fulfil the familial needs. Only two participants, Chayarun and Kochi, said they trusted their husbands and that their children would be safe with them. Kochi happily reported that even when she got angry with her son, her husband would come to mediate. However, this was not the case for our other participants, who found that the presence of children from their first marriage was a major source of conflict with their second husbands. Indeed, Poppy, Sabena, Rubina, Firoza, Farida, Sufia and Meena each reported that their conjugal relationships with their second husbands were negatively affected by three key sources of conflict: their husband's negative attitude towards their children; the negative attitude of their husbands' first wife towards them; and their husband's irregular financial contribution to the household.

Several studies (for example, Smith, Zick, & Duncan, 1991; Casper et al., 1994; Smock, 2000; Huang, 2012) have focused on the economic rationale for women's remarriage. However, most of our participants, although poor, were the main breadwinners for their household and so their motivations for remarriage were not just founded on obtaining financial security but based on social pressure and an attempt to seek happiness and security, although they found that this was not always forthcoming. Meena, for example, mentioned her husband made no financial contribution to the household and, as such, his presence or absence mattered little to her. The majority of our participants dissolved their first marriage for three key reasons: following their husband's desertion, because their husbands were unwilling or failed to emotionally or economically support the household, and because their husbands were verbally and physically abusive towards them. However, it appears that for most of our participants, remarriage had not led to a positive change in their emotional and socio-economic circumstances.

In terms of household divisions of labor, we found that husbands contributed very little or had no role in domestic labor or household maintenance but they did expect to assert masculine authority and saw themselves as sole decision-makers. Many respondents expressed similar feelings of leading what they felt were quite unhappy and complex lives, constantly negotiating their constrained gender roles as they navigated the minefield of patriarchal norms. They all had to engage in manual labor to support themselves and their children as the chimeric patriarchal bargain was not forthcoming. This is not to suggest that the women did not want to engage in paid employment and be economically independent. Rather, the point here is that all our participants drew from the gendered cultural scripts—they understood the socio-cultural code that men were and should remain the main economic providers and that women needed men to provide security and guardianship, regardless of their lived experiences. The code also dictated

that resource poor women should remarry upon widowhood, divorce or desertion and this remained a powerful social pressure, despite the reality for most of these women that they gained little from this exchange, as Rubina's story illustrated:

After marriage I bought a sewing machine for my second husband as he knew the work. But he is not happy. He keeps asking for more money from me and my son. He regularly abuses me both verbally and physically. He calls me names and hurls abuses saying that I am a characterless woman as I work as a health visitor and supply contraceptives to my clients (Rubina, 40, mother of 3).

This is not to suggest that these women were passive, or lacked agency, rather they were constrained by their wider socio-economic and cultural contexts. Amena, for example, was cynical about the gender norms and social pressures to remarry, stating that she believed that men got married more than once not because their previous marriage failed, but as a means to gain more dowry. She explained that when she remarried, her family gave 70,000 Tk (\$850 approximately) to her husband, but it was not enough for him. After their marriage he stopped working regularly and wanted Amena to work harder to earn a living for the whole family. This was a familiar story, and most of our participants were responsible for their own upkeep and were financially supporting their husbands. The experiences of this small group of women challenged the pernicious social myth that women needed men to survive and marriage brought women security.

### **Impacts on Stepchildren's Wellbeing**

In Bangladeshi society there is little social pressure placed on the stepfather to prove himself to be a good father to the stepchildren, and as custodian mothers are not the legal guardians of their

children, these socio-legal dynamics can create significant difficulties for children who live with their mother after she remarries. All our participants, except Kochi and Chayarun, narrated that their second husbands were hostile towards their stepchildren and were reluctant to provide even basic necessities such as food, clothes, or education, as Firoza explained:

As time passed, he started to become aggressive towards my children—he would beat my children without any reason. He never thought of sending them to school when they were of school-going age, would never buy them a present or show empathy [...] because they are not his children. Firoza (40, mother of 2 from previous marriage)

Mothers in this study reported that stepdaughters in the 11-15 years age group were particularly vulnerable. Poppy's narrative illustrated one case of child abuse in this context. She explained that in her absence her second husband would beat her teenage daughter with a stick and on one occasion he hit her as hard as he could and then slammed her head against the wall because, he claimed, she did not obey his order. Poppy also alleged that her husband subjected her daughter to sexual as well as violent abuse and as she went to work early in the morning and returned home in the evening, she could not safely leave her daughter at home. So she left her with a school teacher in the morning and fetched her in the evening on the way home. In this way she tried to ensure her daughter's safety and security. Rubina also recounted a similar situation where her husband continually harassed her 12 year-old daughter:

My second husband is always angry with my daughter. My daughter works very hard since the morning till it is very late at night, but she cannot make my husband happy. He wants her to do his personal tasks, for example, he asks her to press his legs, massage his body, bring his *lungi* (traditional

Bangladeshi male underwear) when he is taking a bath almost naked, wearing *Gamcha* (a small piece of cloth) [...]. He is a shameless man, how could he ask a young girl to do such type of work? My daughter was in a vulnerable situation. Under these circumstances I had no option but to arrange her marriage. I was so overwhelmed by all this I did not even get the opportunity to know about the man with whom I arranged my daughter's marriage. Now I have come to know that my son-in-law is a man of bad character (Rubina, 40, former mid-wife, mother of 2).

Both Rubina and Meena, said they had to marry off their teenage daughters to protect them from sexual harassment within the home even though they were under the marriageable age of 18. Poppy was giving this serious thought even though she did not want her daughter to be married so young. Half of our participants had to send their young children to the labor market where they were often involved in physically dangerous labor. However even though these children earned an income, their stepfathers were not content with their financial contribution. Rubina, Meena and Poppy told us that no matter how hard their children tried it never seemed to be enough for their husbands and despite making visible contributions they might not receive enough food. In Rubina's account:

At the age of 12, my son started working as a helper on a bus because his stepfather scolded him all the time. After starting work, he gives 2000 Tk. each month to him. My husband yet keeps complaining, saying he eats too much food, he eats like a dog and so on. Sometimes my husband gets mad at my son to the extent that he snatches his dinner plate and throws it away.  
(Rubina, 40, former mid-wife, mother of 2)

The children in these participant households had much to contend with. Most mothers reported that their children were subjected to various forms of physical, emotional and, in some cases, allegedly, sexual abuse, and were also witness to violence against their mothers. Almost all the mothers in this group of resource-poor remarried women recounted their unhappiness, helplessness and frustration regarding their children's well-being but felt constrained by the difficult socio-economic and cultural context to escape from their abuse. For these women remarriage did not bring greater security or happiness, as Meena summarized:

Remarriage can never be a solution for children. My second husband did not spend a single penny for my daughter's [his stepdaughter's] marriage. A stepfather can never act like a biological father. (Meena, 38, mother of 3)

## **Conclusion**

In this in-depth qualitative study, we have been concerned with a detailed exploration of the lives and experiences of twelve women living in Sylhet, northern Bangladesh. These women were all remarried, all resource-poor, and all mothers. We have focused here largely on narratives concerning their wellbeing and that of their children. Their stories were often difficult and challenging to hear, but it is important that they were given the space to recount them. Most of our participants appeared to escape abusive relationships and had remarried in the hope of a better life and greater security, succumbing to social pressures to cease living without male guardianship. In their second marriage for most of these women the abuse started again for both themselves and their children. Most of these mothers were witness to the abuse of their children and their children witnessed the abuse of their mothers. For some, their teenage daughters were sexually harassed, their young children were forced into paid employment and child marriages

were seen by their mothers as the only way to save their children from harm from their husbands. Their biological fathers—their legal guardian and provider—had abandoned them. This sends a powerful message that these children of poorer households were neither valued nor wanted, which at the very least would likely have a serious negative impact on their self-esteem and might lead into an adulthood characterized by limited educational, social and cultural capital.

In the context of Bangladesh, women's wellbeing is largely measured through her economic and familial status. The pernicious 'patriarchal bargain' prevails and continues to be held in high esteem, but for our participants this was largely a chimera. For the majority of these women, remarriage did not bring economic security or even physical and emotional wellbeing. Although resource-poor women may be placed under significant social pressure to remarry after divorce, desertion or widowhood, social norms still do not deem it 'natural' for children from a first marriage to reside with their mother and this has serious consequences in terms of their treatment at the hands of stepfathers, and the negative perceptions of wider society. The socio-cultural structure of Bangladesh continues to be framed by specifically located patriarchy and in this context women's remarriage challenges normative conjugal relations. Ultimately, based on the experiences of this small group of women, we conclude that the resulting intrafamilial negotiations through remarriages can adversely affect the wellbeing of both mothers and their children.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The average age at first marriage has remained fairly stable at 18.40 years for women and 25.30 years for men based on data from 2013-2015 (BBS, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> We define wellbeing as relating to one's welfare and "the condition of being contented, healthy, or successful" (Collins English Dictionary, 2019), but we are also using the term wellbeing to include a broad range of mental health issues, such as low self-esteem, lack of confidence, feelings of low self-worth, anxiety and depression. These symptoms and experiences are not framed within a medicalized context or explicitly identified as mental health problems by the female participants themselves. Nevertheless these women's understanding and expressions of wellbeing for both themselves and their children have a significant impact on women's health and wellbeing as well as on more material aspects of their lives such as their aspirations, achievements and levels of resilience (Clisby & Holdsworth, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> In Bangladesh, majority of people have ancestral homes in rural areas. These are small houses in most cases shared by all the siblings.