Adolescents' reproductive health in rural Bangladesh

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Preface

In the summer of 1983 I went camping with my parents, younger sister and brother. In more than one respect, this summer reflected a transition: not only was I in between two schools (primary and secondary school), but I also reached menarche. Although prepared, it came as a surprise. However, the surprise never turned into fear or shock, as it did with so many of the adolescent girls who we interviewed for this study in Matlab. Also, menarche did not instantly put an end to my ‘period of childhood’ nor did it bring about major behavioural changes such as learning the ‘adult female role’ as described so vividly by Blanchet and White for Bangladesh.

This study is a result of close co-operation between HERA (HEalthy reproduction: Research for Action, a collaboration between the Population Research Centre (PRC) of the University of Groningen and the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI), and ICDDR,B (Centre for Health and Population Research, formerly known as the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh). The study, carried out between 2000 and 2005, was made feasible thanks to a generous grant from WOTRO (Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research) and its completion was achieved through financial support from NIDI and HERA, for which I am most grateful.

I was extremely fortunate to have three promoters: Prof. Inge Hutter, Prof. Frans Willekens and Prof. Jeroen van Ginneken. Each of them contributed to this study in a different way and, very important, on a most effective and co-operative basis. This project would never have been conducted if Jeroen, and his wife Lia, had not left in 1996 for Dhaka, Bangladesh, where Jeroen went to work as head of the Health and Demographic Surveillance System (HDSS) at ICDDR,B. I enthusiastically accepted his offer to go to Dhaka for three months to carry out a feasibility study. Was it coincidence or fate that brought you, and subsequently me, to Bangladesh? Jeroen, I highly appreciate your generosity, kindness and continuous involvement in this project. It was Inge, however, who came up with the idea of following up an under-five population to their adolescence and to focus on their reproductive health status. It was also Inge who taught me about the beauty (or in her words, the charm of ‘mud feet’) and the special nature of doing fieldwork. Inge, we went through this project side by side, from A to Z, and although we met with some setbacks, we never lost confidence that this project would ultimately be accomplished. Thank you for this confidence, for sharing your research knowledge and experience, for your enthusiasm and meticulousness readings of the various drafts, and thank you for being so big-hearted. I hope that we will co-operate productive and pleasant in the future as well. I was also most fortunate to have Frans as a promoter because of his statistical expertise and his willingness to help me dredge up and increase my knowledge about lifetable analyses. Frans, I highly appreciate in particular your patience, energy and curiosity.

Heartfelt thanks are also due to Dr. Baqui, affiliated with ICDDR,B and Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, for providing me the baseline data without which this longitudinal study could not have taken place. In addition, this research could not have been carried out without the conscientiously collected data for the follow-up study. I am foremost very grateful to all adolescents and their parents, most of whom were very co-operative in their response to our questions. With the tireless support of
Mrs. Khaleda Khanam, whom I deeply appreciate for her purposiveness and intelligence, it were Masuda Sharif, Hazera Akter, Zohora Akter, Amina Khatun, Ayesha Begum, Shah Alam, Uttam Kumar Dewanjii and Zakir Hossain Khan who made it, together with the porters, an all-out effort to trace and interview the adolescents. Dhonnobad!

My appreciation also extends to Mrs. Noor Jahan for her help with data entry and Mr. Bijoy for the translation of Bangla texts. Moreover, I am indebted to numerous other persons from ICDDR,B, especially those from the Health and Demographic Surveillance Programme, the Social and Behavioural Sciences Programme, the Reproductive and Sexual Health programme, all in Dhaka, and those working at the Matlab Field Research Station. It is not possible to mention everyone, but I would like to thank in particular the following: Mr. Chakraborty, Dr. Abbas Bhuiya, Dr. Yunus, Mr. Sarder, Mr. Mobinul Islam, the Emdat family, Dr. Kim Streetfield, Prof. Persson, Mr. Carel van Mels and his wife Jotine, Dr. Japhet Killewo, Prof. Aziz, Dr. Rahman, Dr. Kaniz Gausia, Dr. Dewan Allam, Dr. Shams El Arifeen, Greet Dieltiens, Dr. Lauren Blum, Tazek, Ayesha, Nazneen, Razia, Tamanna, Papreen, Sabrina, Gulshan, Dr. Razzaque, Dr. Nural Alam, Dr. Bairagi, Dr. Golam Mostafa, Mr. Sentu Gomes, Mrs. Lutfun Nahar and Mrs. Nasrin Akhtar. I would also like to convey a special word of thanks to Lutfa Begum, my counterpart for almost two years, and from whom I learned a lot about Bangladesh.

I gratefully acknowledge Prof. Jane Kusin, nutritionist and member of the board of ICDDR,B, for carefully reading drafts of this dissertation. In addition, I thank Dr. Bart de Bruijn and Dr. Frank Eelens from NIDI for their comments on earlier parts of the manuscript. My appreciation also extends to Dr. Albert Mantingh from Groningen University Hospital, Department of obstetrics and gynaecology, for his prompt and effective responses to my questions. I am furthermore grateful to the members of the reading committee (Prof. van Wissen, Prof. Niehof and Prof. White) and would like to thank in particular Mrs. Gina Rozario for correcting the English manuscript.

I am most happy to have been able to conduct this study at NIDI, a highly stimulating and enjoyable environment for research. I would like to thank all NIDI colleagues, and in particular my always supportive roommate Liesbeth, the BMO secretaries Vera and Monique, and all other (former) BMO-ers, i.e. George, Ronald, Bart, Jacqueline, Daniël, Mieke, Jeannette S., Rob, Harry van D. and Ernst. Moreover, I thank Leon for his crash-course in Blaise, which enabled me to complete the entry of survey data within a reasonable amount of time; Jeroen B. for his continuous IT support; Jolande for helping me keep up with the literature; Harry B. for commenting on texts in Dutch; and the ‘ladies’ of the secretariat, Tonny, Jacqueline and Jeannette van der A. for their involvement and support.

Although I am based at NIDI, the PRC in Groningen feels like a ‘home’ as well because of the staff and students, as there are or have been: Stiny, Maaike, Sarbani, Karen, Sabu, Mazud, Mouri and Mamun, Hideko, Nadja, Ajay, Ida and Miranda and many others whom I have probably forgotten to mention.

In the period between the feasibility study and the completion of this dissertation, I visited Bangladesh several times. Altogether, I spent about 10 months in Dhaka and Matlab, and stayed at many different places and met many different people. I
appreciated the comfort of the rooms of the ICDDR,B guesthouse and the Dutch Club as well as that of houses in Matlab (thanks Khaleda apa and Shomiron apa for your hospitality). Following a more or less chronological order, I thank - again - Jeroen and Lia for hosting me during my very first visit to Dhaka. Warm thanks also to Heidi and Rick. Thanks for your many invitations, the pizzas at the American Club, and just for being there on so many occasions. I am furthermore grateful to Saskia and Karst for sharing their apartment and having me as a lodger for several weeks. I also thank Dineke and Anjali for sharing the ‘student house’ in Dhaka for another month. The most stressful period that I spent in Dhaka was the three weeks during the flood in the summer of 1998. It was the only time that I saw a boat actually overtake the four-wheel drive that picked me up every morning at the Dutch Club. Also during that period, when the Club was shaken by a bomb alert (a hoax, so we learned later), I was relieved to find another place to stay (thanks Els).

Most of the time that I spent in Dhaka, however, was at the Leprosy Mission Guesthouse. I really enjoyed this stay among an international group of leprosy doctors, missionaries, trainees and consultants. In this respect, I am most grateful to Thomas who always took good care of my belongings whenever I was in Matlab for fieldwork, and with whom I shared most of my ‘free’ time, alternately at the German Club or the Dutch Club. I am also indebted to Maria, UN GP, and the only woman in Dhaka who dares to bike all the way from Banani to Gulshan. Maria, thanks for your late-night peanut butter sandwiches every time I came back from Matlab later than expected and thanks in particular for taking me in when ‘my’ room in the guesthouse was rented out to someone else. Allan and Monica, thanks for sharing your ‘spiritual food’. During my stay in Bangladesh, I visited mosques and attended ceremonies in several churches and Hindu temples. However, I felt most at ease at your ‘after-church dinners’. Finally, various trainees (Nienke, Marleen, Marloes and Nelleke, to name a few) made stays much more pleasant because of shared lunches in the ICDDR,B canteen, dinners and parties.

Words of thanks also to the ‘Zonshof groupies’ for your support and numerous emails, and whom I have so blatantly neglected in the past year(s). I will better my (post-PhD) life. Lots of appreciation of course as well to my two paramiffs, Annette Kik and Albert Bosch. Finally, I am indebted to my father and mother for their unfailing support throughout my educational and professional career. The choices I have made with respect to education as well as in my professional life are to a large extent driven by some of your mottos among which include ‘pursue what makes you happy’ and ‘if you do your best, you can never really fail’. Finally, I thank Menno. Leaving home for study or fieldwork is bearable only with the prospect of returning to you. I still feel truly blessed to have met you so many years ago (while journeying through adolescence, which says something doesn’t it?). Thank you for your love, encouragement, energy, humour and support. A special dimension to this research on reproductive health was added by my own pregnancies during the second half of this PhD study. Khaleda apa, you see, I acted on your advice not to forget about my own reproductive life. I hope, in due time, to be able to bring along Myrthe and Laurens to show them the beauty of Matlab and the generosity of its inhabitants. Inshallah.

Voorburg, 27 April 2005