Analysis consisted of cross-tabulations, disaggregated by duration of husband’s absence and using three months as a threshold. In looking at specific data, where we were interested in apparent changes in proportions between 2006 and 2009 or in comparing differences in changes over time between two different measures, we tested for significance using z tests (or, in the few instances where means rather than proportions were compared, t tests).

RESULTS

Trends in Spousal Separation

In 2001, more than one-fifth (22%) of husbands were living away from their wives; the proportion increased to 26% in 2006 (Figure 1). Data on rural areas, from the 2006 NDHS and the 2009 NFHP survey, indicate that the proportion of currently married women who reported that their husbands were living away increased from 29% in 2006 to 32% in 2009 (p<.01). The proportion of women who reported that their husband was not currently living with them was significantly lower in urban areas than in rural areas, though the gap had shrunk; 12% of urban women reported their husband was living away in 2001, compared with 20% in 2006 (not shown).

In the 2009 survey, nearly two-thirds (64%) of cases of spousal separation were reported to have been for three or more months, and 47% for six or more months. In cases of separations of at least three months, 9% of the absent husbands were reported to be elsewhere in Nepal, 37% in India and 54% in other countries. Among husbands absent for six or more months, 65% were in countries other than Nepal or India.

Use of Contraception

Data from the 2009 survey indicate that among rural women not currently using a contraceptive method, 54% reported the reason for nonuse as “husband not living at home” (not shown). In a setting where spousal absence is common and increasing, assessing family planning program performance using conventional measures of contraceptive prevalence and unmet need may be misleading. Therefore, we examined the potential differences in contraceptive prevalence according to spousal residency status.

Between 2001 and 2006, contraceptive use rose by nine percentage points (from 37% to 46%) among all rural married women of reproductive age (Table 1), compared with a 13-point increase (from 42% to 55%) among rural women whose husbands were residing at home. Between 2006 and 2009, among all married women in the 40-district rural sample, contraceptive use increased by a nonsignificant 1.7 percentage points, a plateau in use that is common and increasing, assessing family planning program performance using conventional measures of contraceptive prevalence and unmet need may be misleading. Therefore, we examined the potential differences in contraceptive prevalence according to spousal residency status and duration of absence.

In 2001, the proportion of households in which as it was in 2001–2006; meanwhile, rates of family planning use among non-cohabiting married couples remained flat over that period.

Unmet Need for Contraception

With increases in contraceptive use, overall unmet need in Nepal has declined steadily, from 31% in 1996 (not shown) to 28% in 2001 and 25% in 2006 (Table 2). In the 40-district rural sample, little change occurred between 2006 and 2009 (from 24% to 26%). To examine this stagnation in level of overall unmet need, we estimated unmet need for couples according to husband’s current residence status.

In 2001, when the proportion of households in which...