



# The Financial Express

## Driving forces behind child marriage

Abdul Bayes | Saturday, 10 August 2019

The incidence of child marriage has reportedly lowered. But we reckon that the menace of early marriage is still rampant across the country. According to the United Nations Children's agency UNICEF, reported few years back, Bangladesh had the fourth-highest rate of marriage in the world, after Niger and Chad in Africa. About three-fourths of Bangladeshi women currently aged 20-49 were married or in a union before age 18, despite a minimum legal marriage for women of 18. In the period 2005 to 2013, according to the UNICEF, two-thirds of girls in Bangladesh married before age 18 and 29 per cent married before age 15.

Again, quoting from the Girls not Brides, an international campaign against child marriage, about 60 per cent of girls in Bangladesh are married before their 18th birthday and a little over one-fifth is married before the age of 15.

According to the UNICEF, writes Girls not Brides, Bangladesh has the fourth highest prevalence rate of child marriage in the world, and the second highest number of absolute child brides - 4,451,000. The median age at first marriage is 15 in Rangpur and 16 in Rajshahi and Khulna.

Let us verify the finding. According to a Census 2013, primary enrolment for girls (6-10) have increased almost cent per cent; at secondary level (11-16) 91 per cent implying that roughly 10 per cent drop out due to marriage or other reasons before 16. But in higher secondary the enrolment is only 21 per cent indicating that about 70 per cent drop out between secondary and higher secondary. Even if we assume that some of them drop out to join jobs, the remaining dropouts could be adduced to marriage and assumes a frightening proportion.

There is still higher incidence of child marriage in rural areas (70 per cent) than in urban areas (53 per cent). Education is another correlate - four-fifths of no education and only primary education married off before 18 compared to 57 per cent of women who studied at least up to secondary schools. Girls from the poorest 20 per cent of families are twice as likely to marry before 18 as girls whose families are among the richest 20 per cent. Third, there is an increased risk of child marriage due to natural disasters associated with climate change. A 2014 study found that impetus for child marriage and dowry are exacerbated by the climate change being experienced by families in rural Bangladesh.

Recent studies have shown that early marriage for girls leads to lower schooling and early pregnancy. Over 20 per cent of those who are brides before reaching 15 years become mothers of three or more children before they are 24 (UNICEF 2014). The ADP survey also highlights an intergenerational agency trap: Mothers marrying early were less likely to have a say in their own marriage, and less willing to give consent if their daughters choose their own life partners.

Combined evidence from WILCAS and the ADP survey suggest that women who make their own choice of partners - which makes access to education and employment opportunities possible by providing increased social contact-are prone to marry later, with positive benefits for the next generation.

Girls married young are more vulnerable to partner violence and sexual abuse than those who marry

later. This is especially true when the age gap is large. Even though some parents believe early marriage will protect their daughters from sexual violence, the reverse is often true, according to UN studies.

Using baseline data from the BRAC's Adolescent Development Program (ADP), we document the intergenerational consequences of early marriage on mothers and their adolescent children sampled from the poorest 19 north-eastern districts of Bangladesh. We tested the extent to which a low level of numeracy among children is explained by early marriage of their mothers. In our data, the level of basic numeracy skills is very low for both groups. Mothers marrying after the age of 15 had about one more year of schooling than those married early. Similarly numeracy, Bangla and English literacy scores of mothers were much lower compared to those who marry on or after 18. Our analysis confirms a causal effect of a mother's early marriage on children's cognitive development. Moreover the effect is significant for daughters. We find evidence of both direct and indirect effects of mothers' early marriage on children. The indirect effect operates by lowering years of schooling which in turn lowers the cognitive skills of mothers.

As argued by the Girls not Brides campaign paraphrased below, substantiating our observations mentioned above, child marriage is driven by gender inequality and the belief that girls are somehow inferior to boys. In Bangladesh, child marriage is also driven by:

\* **Poverty:** The median age of marriage for girls living in the poorest households of Bangladesh is 15, compared to 18 for those living in the richest households. Dowry prices typically increase as girls get older and "less attractive", meaning many families marry girls off at a younger age.

\* **Level of education:** The median age of marriage for Bangladeshi girls who have no education is 15, compared to 20 for those who have completed secondary school or higher. Evidence suggests that teaching girls about their rights and building skills for modern livelihoods can reduce the likelihood of child marriage by up to one third in Bangladesh.

\* **Family honour:** High value is placed on the virginity of girls in Bangladesh and child marriage is often used as a way of controlling pre-marital sex. A 2013 national study shows that fathers are most often responsible for deciding when and who to marry their daughters to.

\* **Humanitarian context:** Natural disasters also exacerbate child marriage in many regions of Bangladesh. Frequent flooding means many families live in insecure conditions and marry off daughters as a survival tactic.

\* **Displacement:** Since 2017, more than 600,000 Rohingya refugees have fled to Bangladesh to escape violence in Myanmar. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has reported instances of child marriage among young girls in refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. Families have reported marrying off young girls to access food rations and protect them from sexual violence within camps.

The point to note is that just making laws regarding child marriage may not serve the purpose. The socio-economic drivers must be addressed along with a vigorous social campaign in a regime of firm political commitment.

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