Child marriage: historical reality around the globe and in Bangladesh – A literature review

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Abstract

Child marriage, defined as marriage before 18 years, is a reality for more than 60 million women worldwide. This is more prevalent in developing countries including Bangladesh. Although the universal age for the marriage of women is 18 years, the girls get married earlier across different countries depending on the socio-cultural perspective. Globally child marriage is not uncommon even in this twenty first century; however, the phenomenon is concentrated in the developing countries, especially in Africa and South Asia. Currently Bangladesh is securing the 8th position among the highest burdened countries with child marriage. This literature review attempts to illuminate over the overall scenario of child marriage with special emphasis on Bangladesh situation. Besides, we also reviewed for drivers, consequences and legal aspects of child marriage. The evidences suggest that education, women empowerment and programmes involving the community stakeholders with bottom-up approach can be effective in preventing child marriage and can foster change relatively quickly.

Key words: Child marriage; Drivers of child marriage; Consequences of child marriage; Legal aspects regarding child marriage; Recommendations; Bangladesh;

1. Introduction

A. Marriage and Child Marriage

The quandary with a sensible definition of marriage prevailed amongst the anthropologists for decades [1]. However, according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, marriage can be defined as the state of being united to a person as spouse in a legal, consensual, and contractual relationship recognized and sanctioned by and dissolvable only by law [2]. Historically, marriage has also been defined as a union between a man and a woman such that children born to the woman are recognized legitimate offspring of
both parents [1]. Although the universal age for the marriage of women is 18 years, in a few African countries the legal age of marriage for girls has been limited to 15 years only [3]. Despite the existence of a fixed legal age, in reality, the girls get married much earlier across different developing countries depending on their socio-cultural perspective [3, 4]. In Mali, 65% of the girls get married before the age of 18 years; this proportion is 57% in Mozambique and 50% India respectively [3]. In spite of the legal age of 15 years in Ethiopia, 50% of the younger girls are married which is 39% in Mali [3]. Furthermore, arranged marriage takes place at birth of the baby girls in some cultures [3]. Child marriage, defined as marriage before 18 years, is increasingly being recognized as a human rights violation [3-9]. Early marriage is vague term and does not necessarily refer to children only [4]. “Early marriage” and “Child brides” are synonymously used terms for child marriage [4]. Although the definition of child marriage includes boys, most children married at <18 years of age are girls [3, 4]. In 2005, the ratio between the ages of marriage for girls and boys was 72:1 in Mali, 21:1 in Kenya and 8:1 in the United States [4]. Child marriage is not only the violation of human rights but also the barrier to the individual and social developments since that prevents girls from obtaining an education, enjoying optimal health, bonding with others their own age, maturing, and ultimately choosing their own life partners [4, 6, 9, 10]. Epidemiologically, child marriage prevalence is measured as the percentage of women 20-24 years old who were married or in union before they were 18 years old [11, 12].

B. Child marriage: Global, regional and Bangladesh scenario

Even at this twenty first century child marriage has been a global reality for more than 60 million women [3, 6, 8, 9]. About 36% of women around the world aged 20–24 years were married or in union before they reached 18 years [13]. Child marriages occur most frequently in South Asia, where 48% of women aged 15–24 got married before the age of 18; these figures are 42% for Africa and 29% for Latin America and the Caribbean [4, 10]. Thus it is evident that child marriage is most commonly practiced custom in South Asia [3, 4, 9, 11, 14]. Previous data indicate that about 30–70% of married young women in South Asia were married before 18 years of age [8, 9, 15]. In India, the largest and most prosperous country in South Asia, 44.5% of women aged 20–24 years were married before age 18 years, 22.6% were married before age 16 years, and 2.6% were married before age 13 years [9]. However, a recent study suggested that this figures are even higher in India [16]. The study was conducted on women ranging in age from 20 to 24 years in 4 South Asian countries and reported that the prevalence of child marriage was highest in Bangladesh (71%), followed by Nepal (62%), India (59%) and Pakistan (50%) [16]. The available literature reveals that the incidence of child marriage in Bangladesh is the highest in Southern Asia and among the highest globally [14]. However, the situation is even worse if we consider women aged 20 to 49 years where the incidence of child marriage jumps up to 77% [17]. Despite showing significant progress in different health indicators, Bangladesh is still lagging behind regarding the issue of child marriage [11]. A report by Unicef stated that Bangladesh continues to have one of the highest child marriage rates (52%) worldwide and the highest rate (18%) of marriage involving girls under 15 [11, 18]. Surprisingly, 2% of the girls in the country are even married before the age of 11 years [18]. In Bangladesh, child marriage is more prevalent in rural areas where 71% of girls are married before the age of 18, compared to 54% in urban areas [11, 12, 19]. However, the data shows that Ban-
2. Drivers of child marriage

A. Drivers identified globally

A statistical analysis of data related to child marriage showed that the risk of child marriage has been decreasing over time [7]. The fixed effect binary logistic regression model identified that rural inhabitation, having Islam as religion and poverty are the mostly significant risk factors for child marriage [7]. The same study also suggested women’s education as an important determinant [7]. Nour et al. (2009) identified three main forces as drivers of child marriages: poverty, the need to reinforce social ties, and the belief that it offers protection [3]. It has been shown in literature that poverty plays the most important role in perpetuating child marriage [3, 4, 7, 9, 14, 17, 19-24]. It is found that girls living in poor households are almost twice as likely as girls from wealthier families to marry before the age of 18 years [22]. The poorer parents are faced with 2 economic incentives from child marriage; firstly, to ensure their daughter’s financial security and secondly, to reduce the economic burden daughters place on the family [3, 4]. In some cultures, the girls’ families get dowry on marriage and the dowry decreases as the girl gets older, which may tempt parents to have their daughters married and married at younger ages [4]. The parents in some African countries also worry about ensuring their daughters’ virginity and chastity [4, 17]. Child marriage is also seen as a protective mechanism against premarital sexual activity, unintended pregnancies, and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) [4, 17]. In a study, primary and secondary education was found to be protective for child marriage in India, while only secondary education was protective in Nepal [25].

Box 1: Drivers of child marriage in Bangladesh

- Traditional norms and social pressure
- Poverty
- Education
- Patriarchal society
- Lack of social security
- Dowry

B. Drivers identified in Bangladesh

The information regarding geographical and contextual factors associated with child marriage in Bangladesh is still in scarce [7]. However, poverty has been acknowledged as one of the most powerful drivers of the harmful practice of child marriage in Bangladesh [14, 17]. Women’s education is also a significant determinant of child marriage [17]. Besides, the societal perspectives could also play vital role in Bangladesh [26-30]. Surprisingly natural disasters also exacerbate child marriage in many regions of Bangladesh, frequent flooding and river erosion means many families live with the constant threat of insecurity and increased poverty, which impacts decisions about schooling and marriage for girls [12, 19]. The factors which operate as the drivers of child marriage are not few in numbers and very often they are correlated. This review attempted to identify the most significant factors tried for child marriage in Bangladesh [Box 1]:
1. Traditional norms and social pressure

In Bangladesh the traditional norm is that the girls are transferred to another family through marriage and the parents consider it as the divine command to marry off their girls in earliest possible time [27]. Social pressure is also added to the family responsibility of a daughter’s marriage [27]. Moreover, there is another social belief in Bangladesh that the women need to get married at least once in their lifetime [27]. Even the girls with physical or mental challenge are married off in exchange of high amount of dowry [27]. The parents are concerned about their daughters’ chastity although usually they do not care about the male chastity [26]. Another societal discrimination lies in the fact that a male can remain unmarried as long as he wishes, whereas a woman hardly can enjoy the status of being single in our country [26]. Furthermore, young girls are thought to have greater sexual and procreative power than older girls, and the bridegroom party look for younger girls because of their mindset of considering marriage as a mean of procreation of children only [26].

2. Poverty

Beside the deeply embedded cultural and religious beliefs, drivers of child marriage in Bangladesh also include poverty and the parents’ desire to secure economic and social security for their daughters [12, 19]. In every corner of Bangladesh, poor are at more risk of child marriage [12, 29]. In rural Bangladesh, the girls are considered as the burden of their family while the boys are thought to be assets, because it is believed that the girls will not able to contribute their natal family financially [12, 18, 29, 31]. Hence, parents in rural area want to marry off their daughters as early as possible [31]. Poorer family observes the early marriage of their daughters financially beneficial as they are no longer burdened with supporting their children and the responsibilities of the girls are transferred to the husbands after marriage [31]. Moreover, early marriages of the daughters are considered as less costly, because a younger bride can be married with small dowry [4]. Hence, in Bangladesh, low socio-economic status is a significant factor for child marriage.

3. Education:

Next to the poverty, lack of proper education is the causative factor for child marriage in Bangladesh [31]. Several studies have shown the correlation between lower levels of education and higher levels of early marriage [31-33]. Furthermore, uneducated parents are less likely to be aware of the laws related with the prohibitions of child marriage and the consequences related with the child marriage which might result in child marriage as well [32, 33]. A study showed that in Bangladesh, primary education was not protective against girl child marriage; although the secondary education was found to be protective across minor age at marriage categories in Bangladesh [25].

4. Patriarchal society:

As a bearer of patriarchal society, the community of Bangladesh commonly recognizes several practices that discriminate the women from men [18, 28]. From the very childhood it is taught to the girls that they should remain under the control of men as a result of which the girls are discouraged to the education and becoming self-reliant [28]. An educated, self-reliant and matured girl is well aware of her rights which is considered as a challenge for men in this patriarchal society [28]. Therefore, it is always tried to marry off the girls early so that they cannot fight against all the inequalities and inequities.
5. Lack of social security:

In Bangladesh young girls are at high risk of being harassed, raped and murdered [28, 30]. Recent incidents suggest that girls are not secured anywhere [30]. For the lack of social security the parents believe that it is necessary to marry off their girls when they reach at menarche [30]. In Bangladesh, as mentioned before, women are regarded as weak and vulnerable and in continuous need of male guardianship, patronage, protection and security, so as to prevent the girls from possible rape and murder [30]. This phenomenon is also considered as one of the leading causes of Child marriage [30].

6. Dowry:

Dowry is also a driving factor with prices often increasing the older a girl gets which often drives the girls from poorer families to be child brides [12, 19]. In rural area of Bangladesh dowry has become the essential requirement of a marriage [29]. If the demands of the dowry is not agreed upon, the proposed marriage gets abandoned [29]. Moreover, if the bride party failed to fulfill the agreed demands at the time of marriage or shortly thereafter, the bride becomes an inevitable subject of harassments and torture both physically and mentally [29]. However, this is well established fact that, the amount of dowry is less if the bride is younger [29]. Thus, parents in Bangladesh, especially the poorer ones in rural areas, try to give marriage of their daughter at their early ages with an intention to make agreements of dowry with smaller amount of money or other properties.

3. Consequences of child marriage

A. Health consequences related to pregnancy, childbirth and on offspring

Marriage at a very young age has grave health consequences for both the young women and their children. These women are more likely than those who are married as adults to report early, frequent, and unplanned pregnancies [8, 9, 20, 21]. Deliveries from child marriages can be called “too soon, too close, too many, or too late” [3]. Data demonstrate that even after surviving the first year, children younger than 5 years had a 28% higher mortality rate in the young mothers’ cohort which might be due to the young mothers’ poor nutrition, physical and emotional immaturity, lack of access to social and reproductive services, and higher risk for infectious diseases [3]. Such pregnancies have been consistently linked to increased risk of maternal and infant morbidity and mortality [8, 9, 20, 21]. In a study the association between child marriage and high fertility, a repeat childbirth in less than 24 months, multiple unwanted pregnancies, pregnancy termination, and sterilization all found to be significant after controlling for duration of marriage [9]. Moreover, the adolescent mothers are also more likely to experience fistula, pregnancy complications, and death during childbirth than are older mothers [9, 15, 16, 20, 21]. The pathophysiology of obstructed labour of young pregnant women lies in the smaller size of the pelvis which ultimately leads to obstetric fistula [4]. Girls aged 15 to 19 years are twice as likely as older women to die from childbirth and pregnancy, making pregnancy the leading cause of maternal death in poor countries for this age group [34]. The result of a recent study suggested that child marriage is significantly associated with a history of rapid repeat childbirth, current modern contraceptive use, female sterilization, not using contraception before first childbirth, pregnancy termination, unintended pregnancy, and inadequate use of maternal health services, although the associations are not always consistent across countries [16]. Findings of another study revealed that, after being adjusted for socio-demographic factors, child marriage compared to adult marriage ap-
appeared to be significantly associated with lower age at first birth, higher fertility, increased risk of child mortality, decreased risk of contraceptive-use before any childbirth, higher risk of giving three or more childbirth, elevated risk of unplanned pregnancies, increased risk of pregnancy termination, and higher risk of the use of any current contraceptive method [13]. Besides, child marriage found to be significantly associated with the likelihood of stillbirth/miscarriage and pregnancy termination in Bangladesh [17]. The children of teenage mothers experience serious health consequences as well which include premature birth, low birth weight or deaths [4, 34]. A study suggested that stunting and underweight remained significantly associated with maternal early marriage even after adjusted analyses [35]. Therefore, we can infer that child marriage has a very profound negative impact on girl mothers and their offspring’s health.

B. Health consequences related to infection and other diseases

The adolescent girls are in increased risk for sexually transmitted diseases, cervical cancer, malaria, and even HIV [4]. It is evident that marriage by age 20 has become a risk factor for HIV infection for young and adolescent girls [4, 36]. In sub-Saharan Africa, girls ages 15–19 years are 2–8 times more likely than boys of the same age to become infected with HIV [4, 36]. Early marriage is named as a risk factor for cervical cancer as well [4, 37]. Research demonstrates that child marriage also increases the risk of human papillomavirus transmission and cervical cancer [4, 17, 35]. Pregnant girls are at increased risk of acquiring diseases like malaria [4]. Early initiation of sexual intercourse has been linked to increased risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) [38, 39], and pregnancy during adolescence [17]. As a result of these health consequences the girls feel rejected, isolated, and depressed [35] which can be considered as the psychological health consequence of child marriage.

C. Educational consequences

Child marriage has serious consequences for national development, stunting educational and vocational opportunities for a large sector of the population [8, 9, 20, 21]. A statistical modeling exercise showed that each additional year of early marriage reduces the probability of literacy among women who married early by 5.7 percentage points, the probability of having at least some secondary schooling by 5.6 points, and the probability of secondary school completion by 3.5 points [2]. Early marriage causes girls to drop out from education and it limits their reasonable opportunities for social activities which has been evident from a study where it was found that only 45% of the adolescent girls were enrolled in secondary school and even fewer attended regularly [40]. New brides are expected and forced into the work of their husband’s household like the child domestic workers which impacts on the continuation of their education as well [40].

D. Socio-economic consequences

The negative outcomes associated with early marriage and dropping out of high school have the potential to affect not only the individual decision-making but also children and the rest of the society [31]. The adolescent brides are expected to take part in the household chores which also hampers their education and puts them in societal pressure [31]. Thus child brides are less able than older or unmarried girls to access schooling and income-generating opportunities or to benefit from education or economic development programs [22]. Child marriage is a substantial hurdle to socio-economic development in Bangladesh as in other developing countries [22].
E. Consequences on gender equity

Early marriage perpetrates gender inequality to a large extent [28, 30, 31]. Child marriage restricts a girl’s access to education and opportunities of employment consequently which is a clear violation of equity [28]. The discriminatory gender norms work as the prevention of different social life of the girls [28, 30].

4. Legal aspect of child marriage

A. History and global scenario

The United Nations and other international agencies declared child marriage as a violation of human and children’s rights [3]. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights stated that individuals must enter marriage freely with full consent and must be at full age [3]. In 1979, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women defer legalization of child marriage [3]. In 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child defined children as persons under the age of 18 years [3]. Many countries passed laws changing the legal age of marriage to 18 years, but enforcement of these laws is weak [3]. India, the largest and most prosperous nation in south Asia, has maintained laws against child marriage since 1929, although at that time the legal age of marriage was set at 12 years. For girls, defined as female children younger than 18 years of age, the legal age for marriage was increased to 18 years in 1978 [9].

B. Legal aspect of child marriage in Bangladesh

Currently, the minimum legal age for marriage is 18 for women and 21 for men – as stated in the Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929 [12]. According to the Act, to conduct and execute child marriage is a punitive crime, carrying punishment up to one month imprisonment or fine up to 1000 taka fine or both [41]. However the legislations are rarely enforced [23] which caused Bangladesh to be in 8th place in the World regarding the child marriage [11]. In September 2014, the Cabinet of Bangladesh approved language in the draft Child Marriage Restraint Act 2014 to lower the minimum age of marriage from 18 to 16 years for girls [12]. This resulted in international outcry and delayed the passing of the draft Act for two years [12]. In November 2016, the Cabinet supposed to pass the Act during Parliament’s winter session which is in the form of Bill at the current moment [12]. The new Act, if passed, would include a special provision allowing child marriage in “special cases”, such as if a girl becomes pregnant “accidentally” or “illegally”, or where a marriage would protect her ‘honour’ [12]. There are worries that such a provision would legitimize statutory rape and encourage the practice of child marriage [12]. The Bangladesh government is failing to take efficient actions against child marriage [18]. In 2014, at the international “Girl Summit” held in London, United Kingdom, Bangladesh’s prime minister outlined a series of steps to end child marriage, including reform of the law and development of a national plan of action by the end of 2014 [18]. Neither of these steps has been achieved, rather the government has taken a step in the wrong direction by proposing to lower the minimum age of marriage for girls from 18 to 16 years old [18].

5. Commitments from Government of Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a member of the South Asian Initiative to End Violence Against Children (SAIEVAC), which adopted a regional action plan to end child marriage which is to be implemented in 2015 – 2018 [12]. At the Girl Summit in July 2014, Bangladesh committed to taking steps to end child marriage by creating a National Plan of Action
by the end of 2014, by ending marriages of girls and boys under the age of 15, and by reducing the number of girls marrying between the ages of 15 and 18 by one third by 2021 [18]. The government also committed to end all child marriages by 2041 [12]. In this consequence, the Government has begun developing, under the leadership of the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, a National Action Plan to Eliminate Child Marriage 2015-2021 [12].

6. Discussion

Despite widespread efforts and significant investments in both program and policy level across the globe, child marriage still persists as a form of human rights violation, especially in low and middle income countries [42, 43]. In 2007, International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) located a total of 66 programs in different countries addressing child marriage, directly or indirectly [43]. The program scan by ICRW identified 49 programs in Africa, 34 in South Asia and 4 in other countries [43]. The programs mostly involved community sensitization and awareness raising that comprised community involvement and behavioral change communication. The other noteworthy programs included life skills education, and social marketing or entertainment [43]. Similar findings were evident in a systematic review where different intervention programs were included that had school voucher programs, cash transfer, health education, school expenditure support, and life skill education as intervention components [42]. The review identified four interventions having significant impact on reducing child marriage in four different countries, Columbia, Zimbabwe, Mexico and India [44-47]. In Columbia, the main intervention component was school voucher lottery for private school tuition that was implied on school boys and girls with mean age of 13 years [44]. Besides, the intervention in Zimbabwe included payment of school fees, provision of school uniforms, books, and other school supplies and focused on orphaned school girls of 12 years of age [46]. However, despite differences in components, both these interventions reduced the proportion of girls married early [42]. The Mexico intervention that increased mean age at marriage, involved households and was composed of conditional cash transfer (school attendance), provision of sexual and reproductive health education and services [45]. Finally, in India, the intervention focused on community girls and comprised life-skills curriculum, community service, and parental education program [47]. The interventions with mixed impacts were composed of conditional cash transfers and schooling support programs [48-50]. The nations willing to diminish child marriage should take these interventions into account and plan their intervention programs accordingly.

7. Recommendations

To stop child marriage, policies and programs must educate communities, raise awareness, engage local and religious leaders, involve parents, and empower girls [4]. Programs should aim to retain girls in school for longer periods with an ultimate goal of overall social development of Bangladesh [17]. Along with formal education, women should be educated informally regarding the risks and adverse outcomes of child marriage and teenage pregnancy [7]. Intervention programs should aim to increase total food intake, provide education and health care for girls aged 10-15, promote the use of contraception, register marriages and provide family life education, and involve boys in the education process [51]. Ending child marriage would require the consent of all those involved, including fathers and religious, community, and tribal leaders. To break the cycle of poverty, pro-
grams are needed to educate and empower women [4]. Increased enforcement of existing policies is crucial for prevention of child marriage. Improved family-planning education, access, and support are urgently needed for women married as children, their husbands, and their families to reduce the high fertility and poor fertility-control outcomes of this practice [9]. Overall, participation from every level of community is vital to end this social epidemic of child marriage from Bangladesh as well as from this green planet.

References:


