

Child marriage in Bangladesh during COVID-19 (2020-2022): A Study on Secondary High School in Rajshahi

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ABSTRACT

Child marriage is one of the social disorders in Bangladesh which is barrier to overall progress of the country. It is a social circumstance in Bangladesh that might be defined in many ways such as ; a legal problem, social problem, health problem, population problem and gender discrimination problem. The purpose of this paper is to analyze how lockdown affects child marriage or mandatory marriage. However, many studies show that in pandemic period because of child marriage implementation, it is heavily affecting the girls. The survey report of the Pannapara High School shows that about 35% girls are married in covid-19 period. The study also aims at determining the immediate causes of forced marriage during Covid-19 as well as how the lockdown period due to Covid-19 influenced the decision of marriage. School closures and declining family incomes have direct connection with child marriage which also put additional pressure on families.

Keywords: Child marriage, Covid-19, Mandatory marriage, Lockdown

INTRODUCTION

Child marriage is a contravention of human rights. It adversely affects education, health and well-being of girls and perpetuates cycles of poverty. Child brides experience the detrimental physical, psychological and social consequence of child marriage. Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world. The corona virus pandemic has caused a sharp and steady rise in child marriage in Bangladesh, raising fears that the south Asian country might not meet its goal of eliminating child marriage any time soon. Before the virus, Bangladesh secured a notable development in curbing child marriage but growing concerns regarding joblessness, poverty, food scarcity and fear and insecurity among parents due to the pandemic are blamed for a surge in child marriage. Bangladesh is among the top 10 countries in the world for child marriage. It is eighth from the bottom in South Asia, according to a UN report^[1]

LITERATURE REVIEW

Erica Hall described that the number of child marriages increases during conflicts, disasters or epidemics,” Hall also added that the risk of this child marriage is increasing as various agencies are not able to work in full force in this situation. Hall added that in order to reduce the number of children in the family, parents can decide to marry their daughter. “It’s a survival strategy” (Kimani, 2020).

Women and girls are more vulnerable group before disaster, during disaster and after disaster (Nasreen, 2017). According to the study, 85 percent marriage took place due to guardian’s concern for their daughter’s future, school closure is responsible for 71 percent of child marriage, 62 percent occurred due to the preference of potential grooms who lost their job overseas and returned to their village, low income or inability of guardians to maintain family facilitated 61 percent of marriages (Akter, 2020). 45

According to UNICEF, 59 percent of adolescents in the country get married before the age of 18. And 22

percent of marriages are 15 years old. The non-governmental organization 'Foundation for People' prepared a survey report by calling 56 thousand women and children. It said 482 child marriages were held in 53 districts in June this year (Khan,2020). According to the Child Helpline 1098, the number of child marriage-related phone calls has more than doubled since then.

Chowdhury Md. Mohaimen, Manager of Child Helpline reported that the rate of child marriage in Bangladesh has risen alarmingly due to corona infection. He said, In April this year, the child helpline received 450 phone calls related to child marriage. But in March, this number was 322 (Khan, 2020).

Domestic violence is also increasing due to lockdowns in Asia .Child marriage rates increase, with a disproportionate impact on girls. While gender inequality is a root cause of child marriage in both stable and crisis contexts, often in times of crisis, families see child marriage as a way to cope with greater economic hardship and to protect girls from increased violence (Girls Not Bride, 2020).

For this reason, it is necessary to conduct a study on child marriage with a view to describing the actual position of girls and guardians' sense.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, Quantitative data are used to quantify defined variables. For collecting data, a well-structured questionnaire was prepared. In this survey process, all questions are close-ended. Any written or published books, journal and newspaper articles, online sources, and e-resources related to the study topic were also regarded as secondary sources of data for this study. The present study did not investigate all the secondary high school of Bangladesh due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Information about the students from class six to ten has been taken from Pannapra High School at Rajshahi Division in Bangladesh. Data has been collected from the teachers of Pannapara High School. Twenty five questionnaires were distributed to 25 respondents and 20 questionnaires were returned to the researcher. Teachers were selected randomly as the sample for this study because of the unavailability of the teachers in their educational institutions due to the Covid -19 situation. All the collected data and have been processed and organized properly.

Study Area: Pannapara is a village at Baghaupzilla in Rajshahi district of Bangladesh. Almost two thousand people live in this village. Agriculture is the main occupation of the people of this village. The primary data have been collected from Pannapara Secondary High school.

Objectives of the Study:

This study is guided to explore how lockdown period due to Covid-19 affected marriage or forced marriage and to understand the immediate causes of child marriage during Covid-19. The work also prominences on the different factors regarding child marriage during Covid-19 as well as women's physiological stress owing to forced marriage.

Child marriage: Marriage is the foundation of all civilized communities and it is one of the oldest institutions in the history of human civilization (Faiz-ud-din, 2008).It is legally and socially sanctioned amalgamation between two persons of opposite sex. Marriage is a contract for the procreation and the legalization of children (Hidayatullah, &Hidayatullah2002). Marriage is an institution ordained for the protection of society and in order that human beings may guard themselves from foulness and un-chastity (Ali, 1979).[2]

Child marriage means marriage at the age of juvenility or before the age of marriage fixed by the existing law of the country. When both of the parties or either party of the marriage are minor or under the age fixed for marriage, the marriage is termed as child marriage. Marriage before 18 years is child marriage which is more common among young girls of Bangladesh (Jisun,2016).Section 3 of the Majority Act,1875 states that

a person domiciled in Bangladesh, who has completed the age of 18 years, becomes major and he is capable of entering into any contract. But in case of marriage contract there is an exception. According to section 2 of the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2017 the legal age of marriage for a girl is 18 years and for a boy is 21 years in Bangladesh.

Rising Picture of Child Marriage: Child marriage, especially involving female teenagers or adolescents to much older male counterparts, has been a long-standing socioeconomic crisis in Bangladesh with the highest rate in Asia and fourth highest globally.[3] About 59% of women in the country aged 20-24 years were married before the age of 18 years. The current number of child brides is staggering 38 million, while around 13 million of them have been forced into marriage even before 15 years of age. In the pre-COVID-19 era, Bangladesh had invested tremendous efforts in preventing child marriages. Subsequently, over the decade of 2007-2017, child marriages reduced nationally from 66% to 59%, whereas marriage before 16 years of age plummeted from 46% to 32%.[4] Despite the transient progress, thousand of child marriages are regularly occurring in the country, particularly in the rural and underdeveloped regions.

Child marriage causes have again gained momentum by increasing at least 13% over the past year in Bangladesh, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic.[5] Due to a lack of country-wide surveillance or data gaps, I do not have the actual statistics of child marriage in Bangladesh. What we have are various media reports and non-governmental organizations data collection about child marriage during the COVID-19 lockdown in Bangladesh. A survey conducted in 13 districts revealed that around 11000 early marriages occurred between 17 March 2020 to 12 September 2021. In contrast, “Manusher Jonno Foundation” has reported 13886 child marriages that happened from March to September of 2020 in 21 districts of Bangladesh.[6] A long with the entire country, the most unfortunate incidents were reported from Rajshahi, Khulna, Kurigram and Bagerhat, with around 6500, 3000, 2950 and 3200 child marriage cases, respectively, during the last 18 months of the COVID-19 lockdown.[7] Among the 103407 high school female students of the Rajshahi district, 6512 (around 6.3%) were subjected to underage marriage during school closures, with the largest share (n=1785; 27.4%) reported from Bagmara Upazila of the district.

Since early 2020, there has been a dramatic upsurge in the prevalence of underage marriage, unintended pregnancies and gender-based violence in Bangladesh.[8] Increased poverty, prolonged school closures, service interruptions, social security concerns, family honour, social norms, customary or religious regulations, parental deaths and other social and familial factors have all contributed to this unexpected upsurge in child marriages amid the current pandemic. Additionally, the institutional shutdown may encourage female students from financially challenged and backward families to drop out of school and never return. Evidence demonstrated that 71% of underage marriages in Bangladesh occurred due to the school closure amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the loss of the regular income aggravated economic vulnerability, which resulted in an inclination towards low-cost marriage ceremonies to alleviate existing financial burdens.

PAPERS FINDING

A survey titled ‘Rapid analysis of the Child Marriage Situation during Covid-19 in Bangladesh’, conducted in 84 upazilas of 21 districts in between April and October 2020 by Manusher Jonno Foundation, covered 13,886 child marriage. Among the girls, 50 percent were 16-17 years old, 48 percent were 13-15 years old and 2 percent were only 10-12 years old. Child marriage was more prevalent in Barguna, Kurigram, Nilphamari and Lakshimpur district.

According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF’s Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys 2019, a total of 51 percent of woman aged between 20 and 24 are married off before the age of 18 while, 15 percent are married off before turning 15.

Sayema Haque's study shows, Chapaina wabganj has the highest rate of child marriage (72 percent) and Sylhet has the lowest (25 percent).

As per the data of National Emergency Service 999, after receiving phone calls, 8,254 child marriages were prevented during the corona period from March 2020 to December 2021 [9].

A total of 2,301 girls were married off early in the country's 28 districts in a span of eight months this year between January and August. According to that 288 girls were the victims of early marriage per month.

In this span of time, 589 child marriages were prevented across the country [10].

Marriage of girls between 15 to 19 years of age has increased by 10 percent in 2021 compared to the previous year. Covid fallout led to the marriage of 27 percent of girls of this age group in two years. Of the 27 percent of girls between 15 to 19 years of age who were married off in two years of Covid, 24 percent were married in 2020 and 34 percent in 2021, said the report [11].

Key Facts about Child Marriage in Bangladesh:

1. Bangladesh is home to 38 million child brides, including currently married girls along with women who were first married in childhood. Of these, 13 million married before age 15.
2. Fifty-one percent of young women in Bangladesh were married before their 18th
3. Bangladesh ranks among the top 10 countries in the world with the highest levels of child marriage.
4. A girl's risk of child marriage is influenced by certain background characteristics. Child brides are somewhat more likely to reside in rural areas and to live in poorer households, and are less likely to have more than a secondary education.
5. Married girls are over four times more likely to be out of school than unmarried girls.
6. Nearly 5 in 10 child brides gave birth before age 18 and 8 in 10 gave birth before age 20.
7. The practice of child marriage is less common today than in previous generation.
8. Declines in the practice have been observed across wealthy groups, with more progress seen among the richest.
9. Meeting the SDG target to end child marriage by 2030, or the national target to end child marriage by 2041, will require by 2041, will require a major push. progress must be at least 8 times faster than the rate observed over the past decade to meet the national target, or 17 times faster to meet the SDG target. [12]

Child marriage rating class wise:

Class	Female	Total female	Percentage
Six	2	70	2.85
Seven	1	65	1.53
Eight	3	60	5
Nine	7	55	12.72
Ten	6	55	10.90
Total	19	305	

Data Analysis and reasons of child marriage in pandemic period:

The survey of the study, was conducted to Pannaparah high school. There were total 305 girl students and most of them were married in pandemic period. The school teachers said that total married of girl students

were 19. In the study area, most of the respondents reported that, because of the current pandemic situation, they forced their daughters into marriage. Because they think that the school is closed because of the long lockdown of this Covid-19. As a result the girls are becoming older. So it may be difficult to marry her off later on. So they think it is better to get them married before hand.

In fact, the school has been closed for so long due to this corona. What is the benefit of just sitting at home? It is better to get married.

Social Insecurity is another reason of early marriage or forced marriage during this lockdown period. There is no guarantee when the school will open and when the children will begin study. That is why parents are frustrated with the marriage of their daughters and are being married soon. Most of the parents have reported that they have married off their teenage daughters at low cost during the pandemic period. They are being married the girl at low cost or without arrangement of marriage ceremony.

Job displacement due to the pandemic situation many people lost their job. Some family went to the village and started small business. In this situation they are struggling hard to manage their family and their girl child as a burden. So they take decision to marry their child.

Low demand of bride and overseas bride social pressures and traditions, including the widespread practice of paying dowry, and lower dowries for younger girls, marriage not only accepted, but expected in some communities. During this pandemic it is also act as a major factor. In this pandemic time, dowry is an affecting factor of child or forced marriage.

Most common causes of child marriage include poverty, lack of social security for adolescents, natural disasters, lack of awareness, weakness of law, broken family, lack of education, lack of proper knowledge and tradition, lack of proper knowledge and tradition.

RECOMMENDATION

1. Creation of awareness will prevent child marriage
2. Different dimensions should be brought in the campaign for raising awareness to prevent child marriage
3. Campaigns should be organized keeping male members of the family as the focal point.
4. The government and non-government organizations may allocate separate budget to spread the message to the families about the harm of child marriage through using the media other than their usual activities.
5. Awareness training should be increased at the grassroots level to prevent child marriage.
6. Child marriage committees at the union level should meet regularly
7. The monitoring must be increased so that they send information about child marriage of their respective areas.

CONCLUSION

In Bangladesh the rate of child marriage is very panic especially in the Covid-19 situation. Most of the girls are married in the rural area in pandemic period. Due to poverty, illiteracy, lack of awareness, covid-19, lockdown, joblessness and broken family. It is time to raise consciousness about child marriage. To prevent child marriage, all people need to work together to stop early marriage. Education is the key in this process. Awareness through mass-media (radio, television etc) plays a vital role in broadcasting different programs about the adverse effect of early marriage. Combined efforts of the government, non-government organizations, civil society are very necessary in this regard.

FOOT NOTES

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[10]<https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/5mprrh96c5>

[11]<https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/fhvgiaiskc>

[12] <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/ending-child-marriage-profile-progress-bangladesh>