

Share-Net
Bangladesh

The Knowledge Platform on
Sexual and Reproductive Health & Rights



LITERATURE REVIEW ON

EARLY CHILD MARRIAGE

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PREFACE

This desk review titled **“Early child marriage in Bangladesh: causes and consequences”** is issued by Share-Net Bangladesh secretariat and is funded by Share-Net International in the Netherlands. This was written by Ishrat Jahan, Gazi Sakir Mohammad Pritom and Rushdia Ahmed at the Center for Gender, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (CGSRHR) at BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health (BRAC JPGSPH), BRAC University. Share-Net Bangladesh is a platform for the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) practitioners in Bangladesh and assist to share and exchange information, tools and knowledge within the Community of Practice (CoP) in SRHR. Share-Net started its journey in Bangladesh from 2015. It is a unique partnership between Red Orange Media and Communications, a media and communication expert, and the CGSRHR, at BRAC JPGSPH. This partnership has enabled Share-Net Bangladesh to foster an environment where practitioners are updated with latest developments in SRHR in Bangladesh. BRAC JPGSPH and Red Orange jointly led the platform from October 2014 to December 2017. Since 2018, Red Orange has been hosting Share-Net Bangladesh and BRAC JPGSPH is providing technical expertise on SRHR to the platform. Share-Net Bangladesh has been playing a pioneering role in starting decisive discussions on various critical issues with the members.

This review aims to give a comprehensive idea on the status of child marriage in Bangladesh and to provide an overall picture of the causes and consequences including related legal and policy frameworks in the country.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

APA	American Psychological Association
BDHS	Bangladesh Demographic Health Survey
DHS	Demographic and Health Survey
GAGE	Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence
ICRW	International Center for Research on Women
ICDDRDB	International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
US	United States
VAW	Violence against Women
WHO	World Health Organization

OVERVIEW OF THE REPORT

This report begins with an introduction to sexual harassment, followed by an explanation of the methodology used for this desk review. The next section discusses various definitions of sexual harassment from literature across the globe; this paves the way for the subsequent section which demonstrates the global and national scenario of sexual harassment in public spaces. Section five and six provide further details on the causes and effects of sexual harassment. The report goes on to discuss laws and movements taking place around the world addressing sexual harassment in public spaces, from which ways forward are finally proposed in the conclusion.

1. INTRODUCTION

Early child marriage, according to global literature, is defined as formal or informal union between a boy and girl where either or both parties are under the age of 18 years (Girls Not Brides, 2018). However, in case of Bangladesh, the definition holds different age limits for boys and girls. The Majority Act of 1875 of Bangladesh defines adulthood for girls at 18 years and for boys at 21 years. Therefore, the Child Marriage Restrain Act of 2017 defines child marriage as marriage between a boy and a girl where one or both are underage, as in boy under 21 years of age and girl under 18 years of age (Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, 2017).

Child marriage is regarded as a violation of human rights by United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) as it restricts education and future prospects for adolescent girls. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 5.3 also mandated elimination of child marriage as one of its targets by 2030. Despite relentless efforts by the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) and all other relevant non-government actors, the problem of child marriage has escaped solutions with tenacity. The latest Demographic and Health Survey (2014) showed that

the prevalence of child marriage in Bangladesh is around 59% (BDHS 2014).

This desk review is structured in the following sequence:

1. the concept of early child marriage along with the current prevalence and recent trends in Bangladesh as well as in South Asian and other developing countries
2. underlying reasons and related consequences,
3. the contributing factors for delayed marriage and related consequences
4. the legal and policy frameworks around early child marriage in Bangladesh

The review also draws on global literature where relevant.

2. METHODS

The methodology was informed by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines [Moher et al., 2009]. We searched PubMed and Google Scholar from January 1, 2007 to December 31, 2018 to identify relevant literatures. A list of keywords (such as “early marriage”, “early child marriage” “child marriage” “adolescent marriage” “dowry” “child rights”) were identified (see Annex-1) and used for search in both databases during December 2018 by three researchers. Studies of any design were eligible to be included in this review given they investigated the prevalence and trends of child marriage in Bangladesh, different countries in South Asia and Africa, and developed parts of the world; explored the causes and consequences of early child marriage in Bangladesh; described the legal and policy frameworks in the country; were published in a peer-reviewed journal or identified via the reference lists of included articles; and were written in English. The policy frameworks were identified through searching Government laws and policies online and relevant grey literature.

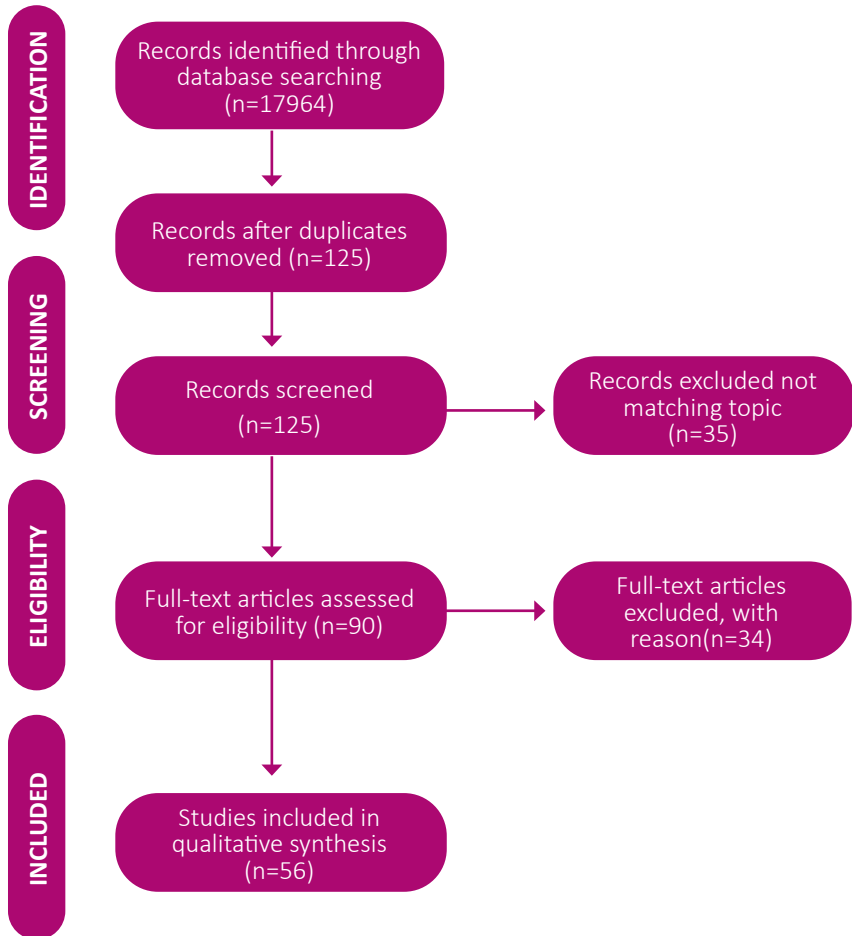
A total of 17964 records were identified using both databases: PubMed (64) and Google Scholar (17900). After removing duplicates and irrelevant literature, a total of 125 records were obtained for screening. After screening through titles and abstracts of the identified 125 literatures, 35 were further

excluded on the basis of exclusion criteria (Exclusion criteria: 1. Studies which are not directly focused on child marriage e.g. studies on SRHR or Maternal Health, which discuss child marriage only as a cause or consequence. 2. Studies which do not have women married as girl child in its study population). The remaining 90 articles were downloaded full-text and further screened to examine eligibility, consequently removing another 34 articles in the process. Finally, 56 relevant peer reviewed articles were included for qualitative synthesis for this desk review (see Annex-Matrix).

A total of 58242 records were identified using both databases (PubMed and Google Scholar). After removing duplicates and grey literature, 2178 records were obtained. In the next step, 2036 literature were excluded after screening through title and abstracts of the studies depending on inclusion and exclusion criteria set for the review. Remaining 142 articles were downloaded full-text for further screening to examine eligibility with regards to study setting, consequently removing another 78 articles in the process. Finally, only 64 relevant full-text articles were included for the data synthesis in this desk review (see Annex-3).

This review also included and referred to six websites (Plan International, Unicef, International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), BRAC, Girls not brides and Human Rights Watch) for important insights on child marriage. These websites were selected purposively from the girlsnotbrides alliance (<https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/>) in Bangladesh based on their track-record on child marriage in South Asia including Bangladesh.

PRISMA 2009 Flow Diagram



3. FINDINGS

PREVALENCE OF EARLY CHILD MARRIAGE

Child marriage is a global issue that affects disproportionately more girls than boys including Bangladesh (UNICEF, 2014). The report also identified that in the year 2011, globally 720 million girls and 156 million boys under the age of 18 years are estimated to be married. The practice of child marriage has continued to decline around the world, in 2018, UNICEF estimated that approximately 650 million girls (which includes girls under age 18 who have already married, and adult women who married in childhood) were child brides. UNICEF suggests that while the global reduction in child marriage is promising, no region is on track to meet the SDG target 5.3 of eliminating the practice of child and early marriage by 2030. During the past decade, the proportion of young women married as children has decreased by 15 per cent, from 1 in 4 (25%) to approximately 1 in 5 (21%), but data does not reflect on the trend of child marriage among boys under 18 or 21 years of age.

However, South Asia still remains home to the largest number of child brides, followed by sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF, 2018), where every 1 in 2 women are marrying under the age of 18 (Plan's Asia Regional Office & ICRW, 2013). Countries with high rates of child marriage are concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa but due to population size, the largest absolute numbers of child brides (which UNICEF specifies to be particularly aged

under 15) are found in South Asia (Girls not Brides, 2018). The key drivers behind child marriage in South Asia are still heavily gendered, as around 30% girls are married off by the age of 18 whereas (as of Plan and ICRW's 2013 report) the percentage for boys of the same age is 5% (Plan's Asia Regional Office & ICRW, 2013).

UN databases and reports on child marriage state that half (46%) of child marriages occur in South Asia (UNICEF and Girls not Brides, 2014). Casualty of child marriage principally include deeply embedded cultural and religious beliefs, poverty, parents' desire to secure economic and social security for their daughters, and the perceived need to protect girls from harm, including sexual harassment (Girls Not Brides, n.d.). The prevailing regional statistics and the drivers behind them are further illustrated by Raj, McDougal and Rusch in 2012 through a study conducted across 4 countries (Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Nepal) in order to understand the prevalence of child marriage from 1991 – 2007 and whether any reduction had taken place. While the study does not show any specific selection criteria for the countries taken into account, it intended to illustrate the differences that have occurred in the regional child marriage trend through the sample of these 4 countries. The study analyzed all available population-based Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) data from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan between 1991 and 2007 to assess whether prevalence of girl child marriage had changed over the past 17 years in these 4 South Asian nations. Results indicated that the prevalence of girl child marriage decreased in these 4 countries from 1991–1994 to 2005–2007, but the study does not provide an overall percentage of reduction. However, it more specifically illustrates, significant reductions that occurred in marriage of girls prior to age 14 years across all 4 nations, which ranged from 34.7% to 61.0%. Little or no change over time was seen by this study on marriage of 16- to 17-year-old adolescent girls for any nation except Bangladesh,

where such marriages increased by 35.7%. It concluded that that improvements in education of girls and increasing rural to urban migration may have attributed to reductions in child marriage. It further highlights that trends in delaying marriage have occurred among younger but not among older adolescent-girl population within this South Asian region (Raj, McDougal, & Rusch, 2012). However, the burden of child marriage remains high for this region due both to the legacy of how common child marriage was in previous generations and to the region’s large population (UNICEF, 2018). Moving onto a more country specific lens, the literature body on child marriage in Bangladesh (explained in the coming paragraphs) illustrates the prevalence, changes, trends and determinants. According to UNICEF (2018), Bangladesh holds the highest rate of child marriage among all South Asian countries, while globally ranked as 4th, after three African nations of Niger, Central African Republic and Chad (Table 1).

Rank	Country	Married by 18(%)	Married by 15(%)	Source
1	Niger	76.3	28	DHS 2012
2	Chad	66.9	29.7	DHS 2014-15
3	Central African Republic	67.9	29.1	MICS 2010
4	Bangladesh	58.6	22.4	DHS 2014
5	Burkina Faso	51.6	10.2	DHS 2010
6	South Sudan	51.5	8.9	SHHS 2010
7	Mali	51.5	16.5	MICS 2015
8	Guinea	51.2	19.2	MICS 2016
9	Mozambique	48.2	14.3	DHS 2011
10	Somalia	45.3	8.4	MICS 2006
11	Nigeria	43.5	18.2	MICS 2016-17
12	Malawi	42.1	9	DHS 2015
13	Madagascar	41.2	12.4	ENSOMD 2012-13

Rank	Country	Married by 18(%)	Married by 15(%)	Source
14	Enitrea	40.7	12.9	EPHS 2010
15	Ethiopia	40.3	14.1	DHS 2016
16	Uganda	39.7	9.9	DHS 2011
17	Nepal	39.5	7	DHS 2016
18	Sierra Leone	38.9	12.5	DHS 2013
19	Democratic Republic of the Congo	37.3	10	DHS 2013-14
20	Mauritania	37	17.8	MICS 2015

Table 1: Top 20 countries with levels of child marriage (according to married by 18 years) according to UNICEF

Source: Table generated with the open source data from UNICEF data, last updated March 2018

3.1 PREVALENCE OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN BANGLADESH

The prevalence of child marriage in Bangladesh is estimated at 59% in 2014 (BDHS 2014). According to a secondary data analysis of the BDHS 2011 data conducted by Hossain, Mahmud and Saw in 2016, nearly 4 in 5 girls in Bangladesh were married before 18 years of age (M. G. Hossain, Mahumud, & Saw, 2016). Apart from the nationally representative BDHS survey, few surveys conducted locally have estimated higher prevalence of child marriage in rural areas (Kamal, Hassan, Alam, & Ying, 2015; Kamal, 2012; Field and Ambrus, 2008). A 2011 quantitative survey in Dhamrai, a rural area in Bangladesh, found the prevalence of child marriage at 63.7% (M. Z. Islam, Shaila, & Farzana, 2011) while another survey conducted in Meherpur in the same year reported 79% prevalence rate (M. K. Hossain, Mondal, & Akter, 2011). Results from a large survey conducted with 5,367 married women of reproductive age (15-49 years) in 2013 estimated child marriage rate at 64% (Plan International Bangladesh and icddr, 2013). Of these 5,367 married women, 2,679 were from rural areas and 2,688 from urban areas.

Analyzing BDHS data from 1993 to 2011, Hossain et al. (2016) concluded that child marriage among Bangladesh had shown a decreasing trend over time. The report further explains that over the past two decades, the proportion of Bangladeshi women marrying before the legal age decreased from 73% in 1989 to 65% in 2011 and furthermore, the proportion of women marrying by age 15 years had declined by two-thirds over time, from 65% among women in the oldest cohort (BDHS survey year 2004) to 21% among women in the youngest cohort (BDHS survey year 2007) (M. G. Hossain et al., 2016). Another study using the same dataset reported that the mean age of marriage has been increasing in Bangladesh, although very slowly, by 1.4 years. This increase was linked with a trend of higher education attainment by the girls (Kamal, Hassan, Alam, & Ying, 2015).

The factors associated with higher prevalence of child marriage in Bangladesh are discussed in depth in the following section.

3.2 REASONS FOR EARLY CHILD MARRIAGE IN BANGLADESH

The reasons for child marriage in Bangladesh are multi-dimensional and overlaps with persistent conditions of poverty, social inequality and vulnerability to violence. The upcoming analysis of literature will establish that this practice is deeply embedded within the social fabric and cultural practices where marriages are viewed as a mechanism for providing girls with social and economic security, and protecting them from harm, including sexual harassment. The financial pressure associated with the practice of dowry is also an important driver, in both rural and urban areas. Additionally, this section will shed light on how poor socio-economic status, geographical location and social and cultural norms contribute making it

more likely for girls to become child brides in Bangladesh. The aforementioned factors that shape the prevalence of child marriage are discussed in detail below.

3.2.1 Socio-cultural norms

Socio-culturally in Bangladesh, menarche signifies adulthood for women, regardless of age and health (Field and Ambrus, 2008). Age at menarche has been hence, identified by researchers as an important predictor of marriage age (Field & Ambrus, 2008). Evidence from research across the South Asian region shows that the events of marriage and menarche occur with a very short interval of time (Kamal et. al., 2015; Field and Ambrus, 2008). A positive association between the onset of menarche and timing of marriage was seen, where late matured females were married at later ages and early matured females got married at an early age (Aryal, 2011). Attitudes towards marrying girls off as soon as they reach menarche is reducing given the rise in awareness through multiple interventions and programs, however, quite slowly. A recent survey with 927 early married respondents by BRAC JPGSPH in urban slums of Bangladesh revealed that the median age at marriage was 16 years. 58% reported that parents are the main decision-makers for their early marriage and many of the parents perceived 15-17 years to be acceptable and appropriate for marriage. This is due to the perception of girls to be mature as soon as they hit puberty and start showing physical changes, especially menarche (unpublished data, 2018).

Religion being another major factor for early child marriage indicates the faith and culture of the Bangladeshi society. To confine with the traditional norm of maintaining purdah and related social practices, parents fulfill their main religious duty of marrying their girl child as early as possible considering it as a divine command (Kamal, Hassan, Alam, & Ying, 2015). Even though studies around world report that Muslim girls get

married at an early age more compared to their Non-Muslim counterparts, the religious norm of getting girls married early is also apparent in Hinduism, historically (Chowdhury, 2004). Birth order was also seen to be associated with risk of early marriage; the first daughter was married off at a younger age compared to the youngest daughters in the family (Kamal et al., 2015). The researchers predict this phenomenon to be related with the longstanding cultural and social norm that older siblings are to be married before their younger counterparts are married (Kamal et al., 2015; Field & Ambrus, 2008).

In a study done among ever married women aged 10-49 years it was shown that the respondents residing from rural areas were more likely to exhibit child marriage related traditional norms compared to those living in urban areas (Kamal, Hassan, Alam, & Ying, 2015). According to Kamal (2012), the difference in socialization process can be partly explained by place of residence. It may very well be that rural-urban differences in cultural and socioeconomic factors might impact when girls are getting married (Kamal, 2012). Rural girls were more likely to be married at a younger age compared to girls in urban areas. This may be because people in rural areas hold more traditional beliefs, such as “girls become old by their twentieth birthday”, which are related to child marriage (Kamal et al., 2015; Plan International Bangladesh and icddr, 2013). Values related to forming a family and family life may have rural-urban differences, which can explain the difference in timing of family formation between rural and urban areas (Kamal, 2012). However, another norm of dropping girls out of school because of the gender beliefs that the aim of girl is not to study or earn rather to help in household chores, agricultural work and to get married, start a family can be included to the reasons of early child marriage in Bangladesh (Sabates et al., 2010; WHO, 2009). This however impacts both rural and urban

areas where the latter is rather worse off. The Population Council urban survey notes that although the national average for secondary school attendance is 49%, in urban slums it is only 18%; in particular, in Dhaka slums, net attendance in secondary education is 14%. Slum areas also have the highest secondary school dropout rates, especially for girls: more than 16% of girls drop out of school compared to 10% of boys (Amin, 2015).

3.2.2 Poverty

The bulk of literature analyzed for this review has identified poverty as a cross cutting problem which influences child marriage despite other demographic or cultural factors (Presler-Marshall and Stavropoulou, 2017; Islam et al., 2016; Kamal et al., 2015; Plan International and icddr,b,2013; Kamal, 2012; UNFPA,2012; Lee-Rife et al., 2012). A study on trends and determinants of child marriage within Bangladesh by Kamal et. al. (2012) found a significantly negative association between wealth index and marriage at a very young age. It is likely that parents of better socio-economic status families have an alternative to delay marrying off their girl child and providing them with higher education and occupational attainment, compared to their poorer counterparts. A research conducted by icddr,b with over 34000 individuals in a rural area of Bangladesh found that parents view daughters as “burden” and want to marry off them early because they believe marriage provides social and economic security to girls as well as their household (icddrb, 2007).

Studies also found that poverty was more significant factor for child marriage in rural families compared to urban families. Marrying off their daughters at an early age decreases the financial burden on the families – is also a strong belief within the rural areas as after marriage the girls move into their husband’s household (Plan International Bangladesh and icddr,b, 2013). However, in the current urban context

where alternative employment opportunities have created the scope for women to be economically solvent, allowing them to negotiate delayed marriages or an incentive for the families who rely on their earning and postpone marriage till productive years in life (Plan International Bangladesh and icddr,b, 2013).

Additionally, poor families who cannot afford more dowry, marry their daughters off at a young age (Plan International Bangladesh and icddr,b, 2013). This can be explained from the World Bank Development Series report (2008) that dowry payments are sensitive to the perceived “qualities of the bride” such as age or the skin tone. At a tender age, girls’ amount of dowry remains lower and increases with age; placing pressure on parents to get their daughters married as early as possible (World Bank, 2008).

3.2.3 Dowry

Studies have found cultural and social traditions are powerful drivers in Bangladesh (Deeba, 2010), for the demands of dowry and increasingly economic factors also play a role. Therefore, dowry can play an important role in facilitating early marriage of girl child or even delaying it. Dowry is a transaction, in most cases monetary in nature, being given from the daughter’s household to that of the groom’s family. The transaction can take place through either the exchange of gifts, fixed assets or money before, during or after the marriage ceremony. While the practice of dowry is perceived to be commonplace and tied to religious and cultural rituals/norms, the legal framework is structured to discourage this practice through the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1980 (Dowry is seen as symbolic of the bride’s value and reflective of the groom’s family’s honour) (Karim, Greene, & Picard, 2016). As it is illegal, families circumvent this by describing it as a ‘gift’. Dowry is provided by the bride’s family to ensure wellbeing in her married life and has become more of a commercial transaction (Presler-Marshall and Stavropoulou, 2017).

Dowry is usually higher in marriage negotiations for “less desirable” girls—those who are older, darker skinned, or with little or no education. Younger girls are perceived to be more desirable and “pure,” as in assumed to have not been sexually active before marriage. Long gap between menarche and marriage reduces the “purity” of a girl, thus making her less desirable for marriage and increasing the amount of dowry (Streatfield, Kamal, Ahsan, & Nahar, 2015). Thus, parents from poor socio-economic background are unwilling to postpone marriages beyond the teenage years because they fear the rising cost of dowries for older brides in relation to the traditional practices present (Presler-Marshall and Stavropoulou, 2017; Streatfield et al., 2015; Amin et al., 2014; Plan International Bangladesh and icddr, 2013; Kamal, 2012).

3.2.4 Level of education and early marriage

The literature body analyzed has shown that education and age at first marriage has a strong correlation: girls with lower education who are more likely to be married off as a child (M.G. Hossain: BDHS 2011) compared to girls who attained higher education had lower rates of child marriage (Kamal, Hassan, Alam and Ying, 2015; Kamal, 2012; Field and Ambrus, 2008; Plan International Bangladesh and icddr, 2013). Girls with lower education undergo societal pressure to be married early than those who are educated (Plan International Bangladesh and icddr, 2013).

3.2.5 Security

Security has been identified as an important trigger for child marriage (Plan International Bangladesh and icddr, 2013; Verma & Srinivasan, 2014; icddr 2007). Majority Bangladeshi adolescent girls, especially poor and socially isolated ones, face multiple threats (i.e. sexual harassment and violence) to their bodily autonomy and integrity as identified by a longitudinal research programme (9 years long) named Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) in 2017. The Violence

Against Women (VAW) study in Bangladesh found that three-quarters of women had experienced forced sex in adolescence, with 40% having been forced before the age of 15 (BBS VAW Survey, 2015). These rates are closely related to child marriage as parents feel the need to ensure their daughters chastity in the face of increasing incidents of sexual harassment, pre-marital sex and even rape (Verma & Srinivasan, 2014). Studies focused on the causes and risk factors of child marriage have reiterated the statement that the risk to adolescent girl's physical safety and the notion of protecting women's "honour and purity" have been driving factors for child marriages in both urban and rural areas (Presler-Marshall and Stavropoulou, 2017; Plan International Bangladesh and icddr, 2013; Kamal, 2012).

Plan's program report from 2014 in Bangladesh has shown evidence from stakeholder workshops and surveys that often parents arrange the marriage of daughters based on her perceived physical maturity than chronological age, which stems from the underlying fear that girls are more vulnerable to sexual harassment, abuse and violence in rural areas and urban slums. In attempt to avoid premarital sexual relation premarital relation and sexual relation by early aged adolescents, parents prefer child marriage as the risks are perceived to be too great (icddr 2007).

The scenario is no different in urban areas. 24% of women reported forced first sexual experience with 38% being younger than 15 years in urban Bangladesh, in both cases, probably within the context of child marriage. In addition, 48% of urban adolescent girls aged 15-19 reported having experienced physical or sexual violence or both by their partner within the past year compared to 10% of older women aged 45-49 (Presler-Marshall and Stavropoulou, 2017).

3.2.6 Love and relationships

Another cause of early marriage mentioned in reviewed literature was love relationships. A 2015 report titled “Marry Before Your House is Swept Away” by Human Rights Watch elaborates on this issue. It states that often there is a social pressure to have girls married early, in an attempt to prevent romantic and/or sexual relationships before marriage. The report presents the story of a girl who had been married hurriedly within a few days, after she disclosed to her mother that she was approached by a boy with a love proposal (Barr, 2015). A 2016 article by two researchers working on schooling and gender norms, explain: “For poor rural parents, early marriage presents itself as a pre-emptive measure or a solution to a perceived ‘crisis’ that may undermine the social position of their adolescent daughters” (Wahhaj & Asadullah, 2016). The “crisis” mentioned signifies the premarital love relationships for the young girls (Plan International Bangladesh and icddr, 2013).

Subsequently, early initiation of sexual interaction by young girls and boys, being engaged in love relationship was also seen as a cause of self-initiated child marriage, especially in urban contexts. A recent survey undertaken by BRAC JPGSPH in urban slums of Dhaka and Chittagong reported, among the 927 early married respondents aged 13-24 years, 38% reported of being engaged in love relationships (unpublished data, 2018). Some young adolescents choose their own partners and some even elope and/or pressurize their parents to get them married. Thus, contributing to increased early child marriage (Ghimire & Samuels, 2014; Verma & Srinivasan, 2014; Plan International Bangladesh and icddr, 2013). A recent qualitative study by BRAC JPGSPH in urban slums of Bangladesh revealed that out of thirty early married adolescents, 10 resorted to eloping/ threatening to elope, and 10 were coerced by their boyfriends – leading to early marriage (unpublished data, 2018).

Besides all these reasons, the current change in legal framework through Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017 by Government of Bangladesh, where marriage of children under 18 years of age has been allowed under special circumstances with parental consent – is assumed to be one substantial factor that precipitates higher rates of early child marriage in the country. There are also associated issues regarding lack of marriage registration, falsified birth certificates and lack of law enforcement around these certifications (discussed elaborately in section Laws, policies and legal loopholes on child marriage in Bangladesh). More recent study touched on an important issue, which is the misrepresentation of marital age of girls by the girl's family. The study was conducted with 1766 women between 15-29 years age and found that 63% girls misreported their age – the pattern was not random, nor were there equal levels of over- and under-reporting to expect if lack of age awareness had been the underlying reason for misreporting (Streatfield, Kamal, Ahsan, & Nahar, 2015). This finding gives rise to speculation whether the real picture of child marriage is even more severe in Bangladesh than is reflected by present data and literature. Under-reporting of age at marriage in Bangladesh may be attributable to the fact that early marriage is still perceived to be the norm. Parents and young girls alike see the advantages in a later age at marriage in principle, but fear that a suitable groom may not be found if they wait too long. The study also perceives that too long a gap between menarche and marriage also raises questions regarding the 'purity' of a girl, which is a culturally imperative requirement of a bride (Streatfield, Kamal, Ahsan, & Nahar, 2015).

4. CONSEQUENCES OF EARLY MARRIAGE IN BANGLADESH: REPRODUCTIVE, EMOTIONAL AND SOCIO-CULTURAL CONSEQUENCES

Child marriage is a threat to the human rights, lives and health of children, especially girls. Beyond the immediate implications, child marriage denies girls the opportunity to fully develop their potential as healthy, productive and empowered citizens (UNFPA, 2012). Child brides are at a distinct disadvantage and the impact of early marriage on their lives is far-reaching: affecting them physically, psychologically, emotionally and socially.

Girls who are married at a young age have less autonomy on decisions affecting their lives and body. A study conducted by Naved (2014) as part of WHO multi-country study found that more than 27% of the study participants (30% in urban and 24% in rural) were forced during first sex by husbands. Physically forced sex was the most common violence within marriage with 34 % in the urban area and 46 % in the rural area (Naved, 2014). Also, they are at a significant risk of

domestic violence or intimate partner violence, found by a cross sectional survey of young women of reproductive age in urban slums of Bangladesh (Chowdhury et al., 2018). A World Health Organization multi-country study explained that due to the high level of child marriage in Bangladesh, young women face intimate partner violence that result into significant higher levels of emotional distress, suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts by women (García-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2005).

A longitudinal survey between 2013-2014 done with 3355 women from 77 villages in Bangladesh found that girls who were married before 15 years of age were at increased risk of intimate partner violence compared to girls married after 18 years of age (Yount et al., 2016). Previous studies have also established higher risk of violence in young brides (Islam, Tareque, Tiedt, & Hoque, 2014). According to the report of a national workshop organized by UNFPA and Plan International in Bangladesh, marriage of a child wife and a much older husband are prone to discord within the couple and can result in divorces, abandonment or polygyny (Verma & Srinivasan, 2014). Social scientists also add that child marriages have higher chances of ending in divorce, as young boys and girls are not ready for the responsibilities that come with married life (Hamilton, 2012). Disputes in marriage sometimes turn into violence and give rise to intimate partner violence.

The GAGE synopsis of evidence from 2017, states that while there are recent shifts towards more gender-equitable attitudes, adolescent girls' voice and agency are tightly restricted by social norms that see their roles as biologically and religiously ordained – and largely confined to reproductive tasks within the private sphere. Marriage not only accelerates the transition to “adulthood,” it also reduces opportunities for personal, emotional, and psychosocial development during the critical phase of adolescence. Husbands and mothers-

in-law may exert greater control over younger women, who have lower levels of education, may be less able to assert themselves. Studies find that the younger a girl marries, the more likely she is to have lower status in each of these hierarchies (Marphatia, Ambale, & Reid, 2017). They are expected to do as they are told by both their husbands and their in-laws and have very little access to decision-making at the household or community level (Presler-Marshall and Stavropoulou, 2017). When questioned on gender and equality norms within marriage, 95% of urban adolescent boys and 87% of adolescent girls in the aforementioned Population Council survey agreed that adolescent wives should always obey their husbands (Amin, 2014). When questioned more directly about decision-making power within the household, 57% of boys and 36% of girls agreed that men should dominate decision-making on family matters (Amin, 2014). This preference appears to play out in real life. The 2016 DHS found that married girls aged 15-19 were the least likely of young women to be allowed to decide on such things as household purchases and healthcare for their children (NIPORT et al., 2013).

Furthermore, according to a research among 204 married females in rural areas of Bangladesh, nearly 58% had their first child between 15-19 years of age (Islam et al., 2011). High prevalence of child marriage in the rural population is theorized to be the reason behind such high rate of child bearing in adolescence. Roy & Singh in their 2016 study utilized the Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) 2011 data that found, women who were married before 18 years had higher unwanted births compared to those married after 18 years of age (Roy & Singh, 2016). Another study which used a similar dataset found that young girls from poorer families and with no education were more at risk of early pregnancy than others (Islam et al., 2017). The socio-cultural impact can be associated with early marriage and childbirth. Social expectation of having a child soon after marriage and starting

a family, fear of infertility for both husband and wife, lack of awareness around risks related to adolescent childbearing and migration of husbands for better economic opportunity were related to early pregnancy and marriage (Henry et al., 2015).

Adolescent married girls also suffer more from obstetric complications compared to adult married women. An observational study conducted in a tertiary level hospital in Bangladesh revealed that genitourinary fistula was more prevalent in females who were married early, suffered from malnourishment and had not sought antenatal care (Aalpona et al., 2018). Subsequently, girls married off at a young age often end up marrying much older and more sexually experienced males, who have a higher chance of contracting STDs (chance of contracting STD increases with sexual experience). So, getting married to an older man would increase the risk of contracting STDs for a young girl, reciprocally a negative consequence of early marriage (Interagency Youth Working Group, 2011).

Apart from these consequences, under-utilization of maternal health services, negative impact on child care by adolescent and child mothers, and related infant and child morbidities and mortalities were also identified as outcomes that affect girls and women who were married at an early age.

4.1 DELAYED MARRIAGE: REASONS AND CONSEQUENCES

While progress is not dramatic, inclination towards child marriage is on the decline. According to Kamal (2012) Bangladeshi females are “in transition with regard to timing of marriage.” BDHS data shows a minor decline of 64% in the year 2011 to 59% in 2014 has been observed in marriage of

girls before 18 years of age (BDHS, 2011; Presler-Marshall and Stavropoulou, 2017). The reasons behind delayed marriage identified by the literature includes but is not limited to – level of education, employment status of adolescent woman, socioeconomic status, different levels and ranges of interventions and programs designed and implemented by Government and non-government actors targeted at cessation of early child marriage.

Education is identified as the most significant single determinant of delaying marriage in Bangladesh, i.e. – higher education levels of girls is likely to be associated with lower probability of early marriage (Kamal et al., 2015; Field and Ambrus, 2008). Field and Ambrus's (2008) paper on analysis of secondary BDHS data from rural Bangladesh indicated that each additional year that marriage is delayed is associated with 0.22 additional year of schooling and 5.6 percent higher literacy. A program report by Plan International in 2013, illustrated that adolescent girls who have attained higher levels of education expectedly gain more control over household resources and hence, are able to achieve better bargaining power in deciding the timing of their marriage (as well as the selection of grooms). Hence, due to prolonged schooling and desire for career development, higher educated women are more likely to aspire to be involved in income generating occupations, thus, marry later than their lower educated counterparts (Kamal, Hassan, Alam, & Ying, 2015; Kamal, 2012).

Kamal et. al. (2015) also reiterates the point that although higher education of both females and males seems to play a protective role in child marriage, it is not education itself, but a combination of a range of factors (social, economic, political or cultural) at play that create a conducive environment where a girl's ability to avoid the chances of child marriage is increased through education. The literature also suggests

that most girls want to marry late, but 'normative rules' limit the extent of delay in a society where 'cultural imperatives' of early marriage still dominate the narrative of marriage. Studies also narrate that economically empowered women are more capable to delay their marriage. (Plan International and icddr,b, 2013). Older unmarried females are perceived to have more social and economic capital due to their higher education and consequent greater income-generating capabilities (Streatfield et al., 2015).

Financial independence was identified as one of the reasons for delaying marriage; the recent survey in urban slums by BRAC JPGSPH outlined that 19.3% of 386 women reported that they were waiting for financial self-sufficiency before getting married. However, some girls who belonged to very poor families had to earn to support their families, and their parents deliberately delayed their marriage so they can continue supporting the family (unpublished data, 2018). In the research with a large sample size, carried out in partnership with Plan International, icddr researchers found unemployed girls in urban Bangladesh are at increased risk of being married as children (Plan International Bangladesh and icddr, 2013). As they cannot participate in the family decision-making, they are at a disadvantage to repel 'good proposals' as seen by her parents. The 2010 Bangladesh Labour Force Survey found that 90% of the country's 1.4 million domestic workers over the age of 15 were female (Ramalho et. al., 2017) which later studies have gone on to illustrate have led to helping them become economic actors, able to support their families, and be recognized as valued as income earners in households and communities (Hossain, 2012; Ramalho et. al., 2017).

According to existing theory, work experience, particularly in the formal sector, exposes women to new ideas and norms along with financial independence that discourage early marriage (Kamal et al., 2015; Kamal, 2012). On the other hand,

the expansion of the ready-made garment industry in the 1980s has created job opportunities for millions of women as semi-skilled professionals (Bhuiyan 2012). This brought about a social change of delaying marriage of young girls within the rural landscape (Amin et al., 1998) due to their economic ties to their families. However, their social status remained unchanged: limiting their choice of life-partner and compromising on less secure or own-choice marriage arrangements (Bhuiyan 2012; Naved, Newby, & Amin, 2001).

Dowry is usually higher in marriage negotiations for “less desirable” girls—those who are older, darker skinned, or with little or no education (Streatfield et al., 2015; Plan International Bangladesh and icddr, 2013; Kamal, 2012). About 2% respondents from BRAC JPGSPH’s recent survey agreed that their physical appearance was the reason behind delaying marriage. Having dark skin, being of short stature and being overweight were considered traits which were very unattractive in the case of females by the society in general, and hence, by the grooms and their families (Unpublished data 2018).

Interventions and programs on child marriage in Bangladesh

Different programs and interventions employing a range of approaches have been designed and implemented for decades in Bangladesh to delay marriage of girls at an early age. Even though there are arguments regarding the rate of early marriage remaining almost constant, counterarguments on the rate of progress in delaying marriages i.e. girls getting married in their late adolescence is also there. Alongside efforts from the Government of Bangladesh, different national and international organizations and actors have been actively trying to prevent early marriage in this sector.

The Government of Bangladesh has mandated to end child marriage by 2041 and lower a third of child marriage for girls aged 15-18 years by 2021. In collaboration with GoB,

UNFPA-UNICEF are jointly working on a Global 5-year long programme namely Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage 2016-2020. Child helplines are being established through this project where a child can anonymously call and seek support to prevent their own early marriage taking place. Other activities under this project includes empowering adolescent boys and girls through training, cash transfer for educational supplies, women help desk in police stations (since women find it easier to talk to a female officer than a male officer) (UNFPA & UNICEF, 2017). BRAC being one of the oldest organizations working on child marriage in Bangladesh, has established adolescent clubs across the country that empower girls through livelihood trainings and life-skills based trainings. BRAC's Adolescent Development Programme (ADP) and Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents (ELA) projects have been shown to provide positive change in knowledge, attitudes and behaviors related to child marriage (Nawaz & Ahmed, 2009; Shahnaz & Karim, 2008). This organization is currently taking forward the Social and Financial Empowerment of Adolescents (SoFEA) project which builds on the success of the two previous projects: ADP and ELA with an aim to empower girls aged 11-21 through social network creation and peer learning course on life skills including early marriage and its related causes and consequences (BRAC, 2013).

The focus of interventions that aim to empower girls and target to reduce early marriage in Bangladesh through life skills-based education and training, are generally designed for economic empowerment and training on income generating activities. Among the empowerment-based approaches – life skills-based education, creating safe spaces (adolescent clubs), educating girls to create awareness regarding themselves and surrounding are significant. As explored by researchers Lee-Rife et al., an added rationale to this may be that when they realize their self-worth, the girls will aspire to have better

jobs and enterprise as an alternative to marriage (Lee-Rife, Malhotra, Warner, & Glinski, 2012).

Another model of relevance is a programme that helps girls establish supportive relationships with peer educators and role models offering life skills training and income-generating activities in girls' clubs. One such model implemented by UNICEF is known as "Kishori Abhijan" (Amin, 2011). Evaluation conducted on this particular programme by the Population Council showed lower marriage rates among 12-14 years aged girls along with financial gain, knowledge on rights and health, improved school enrollment by programme participants (Amin, 2011; Inter Agency Youth Working Group, 2011).

Another approach utilized in interventions to reduce child marriage is promoting education of girls (Lee-Rife et al., 2012; Nawaz & Ahmed, 2009; Amin 2011; Arends-Kuenning & Amin, 2000). Both government and non-government initiatives have addressed this issue with interventions where education/schooling was either a primary approach or combined with empowerment approaches (Lee-Rife et al., 2012). The largest of these interventions has been the Secondary School Stipend Program starting in 1990s by the Government of Bangladesh with schooling of girls as a primary approach of the programme (Arends-Kuenning & Amin, 2000). Other programmes that had education embedded secondarily within their approaches include: Adolescent Reproductive and Sexual Health (ARSH)/KAISAR 2002-2008, Kishori Abhijan 2001-2003 (Save the Children USA Bangladesh Country Office, 2009; Amin, 2011). The schooling programs help girls to develop skills and social networks and gain autonomy, thus helping them to delay marriage (Lee-Rife et al., 2012).

Besides school-based interventions, the government of Bangladesh also has a Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) Program. Through this, vulnerable poor families are given stipends and try to address poverty which had been identified

as a major cause of child marriage. GoB is also addressing sexual harassment of women and children through the Multi-sectoral Programmes to Reduce Violence against Women and Girls and Adolescent Friendly Health services (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF Bangladesh, 2018). Both these interventions address the issue of sexual harassment and violence which are described in previous chapters as causes and consequences of early marriage.

Interventions related to eradicating child marriage in Bangladeshi landscape has mostly been implemented in different rural areas. With fewer interventions focused in urban areas mostly cover urban slum populations. For example, the Urban Partnerships for Poverty Reduction (UPPR) programme taken forward by UNDP in slums of 23 cities and towns of Bangladesh that targets on empowering women. An evaluation in 2016 has shown that there has been marked improvement in empowerment of women and girls through community savings and credit programs, impacting on lowering early marriage (Sinergies, 2016).

Many studies have explored the child marriage phenomena in Bangladesh from different perspectives and methods –programme and intervention reports, Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey data have consistently pointed out that age of first marriage is on the rise i.e. delay in early marriage is occurring, however, the underlying casualties and/or consequences of delayed marriage remain absent in the existing literature body.

5. LAWS, POLICIS AND LEGAL LOOPHOLES ON CHILD MARRIAGE IN BANGLADESH

Child marriage has been illegal in Bangladesh since the adoption of the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, which dictated that “whoever, being a male above twenty-one years of age, or being a female above eighteen years of age, contracts a child marriage shall be punishable with simple imprisonment which may extend to one month, or with fine which may extend to one thousand Taka, or with both.” Bangladesh has recently enacted the new Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017, wherein the law increases the penalty for child marriage but possesses a loophole in form of a special clause, which can be exploited to continue with child marriage. The said clause allows marriage of children under 18 years, not stating any minimum age for marriage, under special circumstances which considers parental consent to be legitimate for initiating marriage – reflects an ambiguous stance of the Government of Bangladesh on the issue (Government of the People’s Republic Of Bangladesh, 2017). According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, “marriage requires the free and full consent of intending spouses, a requirement that cannot be met when one or both of the spouses is too young to consent.” Bangladesh is signatory to various conventions like the 1979 Convention on

the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights that incriminate child marriage through various clauses (Ame, 2013). Recently under sustainable development goal no.5 on Gender Equality, over 190 countries have adopted the SDG Goal 5.3, committed to ending child marriage by 2030. This goal aims to “eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage.” The international community considers this as an important tool to drive action, hold governments to account for their commitments to girls, and track progress on ending child marriage globally (GirlsnotBrides, 2016). According to UNICEF, Bangladesh has also adopted the SDG goal 5 committed to end child marriage. But the recent change in the Marriage Act has put Bangladesh’s state of child marriage into controversy. This revision in the Act has received backlash from the international community, national human rights authorities and regulatory groups that expressed concern over the state of child and women’s rights given the high rates of child marriage in the country.

Ame’s study (2013) suggested that the government signed these treaties with reservations about particular aspects that were considered to conflict with the “personal laws of different religious communities” (Ame, 2013). This situation is further reinforced despite the presence of a large body of laws and regulations. Ame’s (2013) report suggests that the average age for marriage of girls remained at 16.4 years in the Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey 2011. The analysis of literature has consistently suggested that on the ground implementation of the laws are seldom heard of. Authorities rarely intervene to stop child marriages and parents continue to marry their daughters off, even secretly wherever resistance is shown (Ame, 2013).

The laws and regulations that impact the state of child marriage in Bangladesh are not limited to Marriage Act revisions and the government's ambiguity. The state of laws and their revisions or implementation in relation to dowry, birth registration, violence against women, etc. has also historically played a critical role in creating the space for child marriage to become a usual practice. Since one of the important causes of child marriage is dowry, the government has recently moved on to review the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1980. The previous law had a provision to sentence the convicted to imprisonment for a period of 1-5 years with or without fine (Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 1980). The new law will have provision of fine up to 50,000 BDT (BSS, 2018).

Birth registration is also an important issue that is closely linked with child marriage. Many times, parents try to falsify birth registration or do not register at all. Birth registration is necessary for marriage registration under the latest Birth and Death Registration Act 2004 (Bangladesh National Parliament, 2004). Ensuring birth registration can help prevent child marriage (Lomelin, 2014). According to a recent study in Bangladesh, there are no differences between birth registration for boys and girls or urban and rural in Bangladesh. In the recent study "Understanding the nature of child marriage in urban informal settlements in Bangladesh" by BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, survey with 927 early married girls aged 13-24 years, 69% showed their birth certificate during their marriage registration, while 26% did not (unpublished data, 2018). However, the rate of birth registration is still low for Bangladesh (Karim, 2017).

Awareness on legal age of marriage was also found important factor for child marriage, where rate of awareness was more in urban residents compared to their rural counterparts owing to their respective educational background (Plan International Bangladesh and icddr,b, 2013).

All these point towards lack of law enactment and proper enforcement of existing ones around early child marriage in Bangladesh which is why the progress towards reducing the current rates and trends is slower than expected.

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Annex

List of Key words used for searching database:

Early marriage
Early child marriage
Adolescent marriage
Urban child marriage
Rural child marriage
Child marriage laws
Child marriage education
Child marriage violence and insecurity
Child rights
Adolescent development
Sexual and reproductive health rights adolescents
Adolescent reproductive health
Teenage pregnancy
Maternal morbidity; infant mortality
Delayed marriage
Dowry
Community beliefs or perceptions
Menstrual health child marriage
Birth registration
IPV (intimate partner violence)
Adolescents sexual and romantic relationships
Child protection in disaster/ emergency
Religion child marriage
Program interventions early child marriage
Programmatic challenges early child marriage
Age misreporting marriage
Economic burden child marriage
Notions of honour marriage
Notions of purity marriage

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