



Exploring Complex Dynamics of Early Marriage in Rural Bangladesh: Reasons, Psycho-Social, Health and Economic Implications

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Received: 17th November 2024

Accepted: 09th January 2025

Published: 5th February 2025

ABSTRACT

Early marriage remains a significant concern in rural regions of Bangladesh, making it imperative to examine the causes, psycho-social consequences, and economic impacts of early marriage. The cross-sectional study explored these complex dynamics and interviewed 400 girls/women who married before 18 in four selected districts. Descriptive and inferential statistics revealed early marriage being greatly influenced by family attitudes (62.85%) & economic pressures (42.2%). Furthermore, forcible family opinions (75.71%) with the groom's pressure (12.85%) and love relationships (14.28%) played a major role in early marriage. Early married girls experienced depression & sadness (44%), malnutrition (42%), disrupted education (60%) and other economic challenges. Dowries impacted families massively, where 60% provided dowry by taking loans (60.37%) due to having no other option. Early-married girls faced significant hardships, enduring psycho-social and economic oppression that severely impacted their quality of life. There is a need to integrate education, awareness, and policy reforms to mitigate the far-reaching consequences of early marriage.

Keywords: Complex Dynamics, Early Marriage, Reasons, Psycho-social Consequences, Health Implications, Economic Impacts, Rural Bangladesh.

INTRODUCTION

Early marriage continues to be a widespread challenge in many regions, especially in developing nations where economic conditions, cultural traditions, and societal norms often combine to sustain this practice. In the context of Bangladesh, a South Asian nation with a predominantly rural population, early marriage continues to be a prevalent concern that hinders social progress and individual well-being. Bangladesh has made remarkable strides in various sectors, yet the prevalence of early marriage persists as a significant challenge. As reported by the Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) 2017-2018, approximately 59% of girls aged 20-49 were married before reaching the legally mandated age of 18 for females, highlighting the persistence of underage marriage despite statutory regulations (NIPORT, 2019). On the other hand, according to UNICEF, Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of child marriage globally, with an alarming 51% of girls marrying before the age of 18 and 18% before the age of 15 (UNICEF, 2020). This high prevalence is particularly acute in rural areas, where traditional values, limited access to education, and economic constraints often converge to promote the practice (Sinha & Pande, 2019). This alarming figure highlights the need for an in-depth examination of the underlying causes and subsequent impacts of early marriage in rural areas. This concerning statistic underscores the urgent need to thoroughly explore the root causes and far-reaching consequences of early marriage in rural communities.

The causes of early marriage are deeply intertwined with socio-economic, cultural, and educational factors. Poverty, lack of education, and traditional norms play pivotal roles in perpetuating this practice. In rural areas, limited access to quality education and employment opportunities often results in families viewing early marriage as a strategy to secure their daughters' futures (Chowdhury & Akhter, 2017). Poverty and lack of economic opportunities are prominent factors that drive families to marry off their daughters at a young age, as early marriage is often seen as a means of reducing financial burden (Yount *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, deeply rooted cultural norms and gender expectations play a significant role in perpetuating the practice. These cultural norms place a premium on preserving family honor, safeguarding virginity, and ensuring compliance with traditional gender roles (Chowdhury & Mukherjee, 2014; Afzal *et al.*, 2024). Additionally, deeply entrenched gender norms and the desire to adhere to cultural traditions further contribute to the continuation of this practice (Rahman *et al.*, 2018).

Early marriage has profound psycho-social consequences, particularly for young brides. Premature marital responsibilities can lead to heightened vulnerability to domestic violence, limited decision-making power, and compromised mental health (Nasrullah *et al.*, 2014). The abrupt transition to married life, along with limited autonomy and social isolation, can exacerbate psychological distress among young brides, perpetuating a cycle of adverse mental health outcomes. Furthermore, young brides often face early pregnancy and childbirth, which can have serious health implications for both mother and child (Afzal *et al.*, 2022; Afzal and Das, 2023). These challenges can lead to heightened levels of stress, depression, and a sense of isolation (Yount *et al.*, 2016). The economic implications of early marriage are also noteworthy. Adolescent girls who marry early often forego educational and vocational opportunities, limiting their capacity to participate in the formal workforce and achieve economic independence. This perpetuates a cycle of poverty, trapping both individuals and communities in a cycle of limited economic mobility (Sobhan, 2016).

Considering these challenges, this research aims to comprehensively examine the causes, psycho-social and health consequences, along with economic impacts of early marriage in rural Bangladesh. By highlighting these complex dynamics, the study also aims to guide the development of policies and interventions that can effectively reduce early marriage rates and foster the empowerment of young individuals with these communities.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design, Population and Area

This cross-sectional study was conducted among women/girls married before the age of 18 in four selected districts (Meherpur, Tangail, Brahmanbaria & Dhaka) of Bangladesh.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The sample size of the study was determined by using following formulae:

$$n = Z^2 pq / d^2 = (1.96)^2 (.5) (.5) / (.05)^2 = 384$$

there,

$$n = \text{Desired sample size}$$

$$z = \text{Standard normal deviate (1.96 at 95\% level of confidence)}$$

$$p = \text{Prevalence of early marriage (50\% unknown prevalence)}$$

$$q = 1-p$$

$$d = \text{Degree of accuracy required (5\%)}$$

Four districts were randomly chosen in the first step of a multistage systematic sampling procedure. The second stage involved selecting one upazila at random from each randomly chosen district and lastly 100 participants were chosen from each upazila by using purposive sampling technique. Thus, 400 respondents (women/girls who were married before the legal age of marriage) from four selected unions were chosen to make up the research population by taking 50% unknown prevalence and adding 5% non-respondent error. This was in concordance with previously published studies (Sahota *et al.*, 2024)

Data Collection Tools/Questionnaire

Face-to-face interviews were used to collect solely quantitative data. Since Bengali is the native language of Bangladeshi community, participants were provided with a Bengali-translated version of the interview questionnaire to complete. The questionnaire included a number of preset statements concerning the prevalence of early marriages causes & effects, along with yes, no, and comment alternatives that were to be followed. Age, education, educational attainment, employment and family income were among the socio-demographic data gathered. A total of 25 questions were added to investigate the causes, psycho-social consequences and economic impacts of early marriage in rural Bangladesh.

Statistical Analysis

For the purpose of assuring the accuracy and validity of the data, the interview-collected information was reviewed, cleared up, processed, and codified. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. Every p-value that is given is two-tailed. The study's primary characteristics of the data were described through frequencies and percentages using the most recent version of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 25.0) and MS Excel. The prevalence of causes, psycho-social consequences and economic impacts of early marriage were presented using descriptive statistics (frequency, percentages, means, and standard deviations) and inferential analysis (i.e., chi-square tests), which determined associations between independent (age of getting marriage) and dependent variables (mental, physical and other consequences).

RESULTS

Table 1: *Socio-economic background of the respondents*

Variables	Frequency (N=400)	Percentage
Age		
10-15 years	40	10%
15-20 years	125	31.43%
20-25 years	155	38.57%
More than 25 years	80	20%
Educational qualification		
Illiterate	80	20%
Primary	217	54.28%
Secondary	57	14.28%
Higher secondary	46	11.43%
Family type		
Nuclear family	183	45.71%
Joint family	217	54.29%
Number of family members		
0-3	109	27.14%
4-5	74	18.57%
6-7	86	21.42%
More than 7	131	32.85%
Family head		
Husband	240	60%
Father in-law	125	31.43%
Own self	35	8.75%
Per month income (in BDT)		
1000-5000	34	8.57%
5001-10000	154	38.57%
10001-15000	166	41.42%
More than 15000	46	11.42%

Table 1 elucidates the socio-economic background of the respondents where 70% of the respondent's age was 15 to 25 years followed by 31.43% respondents in the age group 15-20 and 38.57% in 20-25 years. Hence, majority of respondent's age was between 15-25 years and average age was 21 years. About 54.28% respondents' education level was primary while 20% were illiterate and 14.28% & 11.43% completed secondary education & higher secondary respectively. Although majority of them were primary level educated but because they had an early marriage, they didn't get the opportunity to continue their study further because of family pressure and other reasons. Another 54.29% respondents were living in joint family structure and 45.71% were living in nuclear family structure. During data collection it was observed that most of the newly married couples primarily live in joint family and after long time of marriage couples have formed nuclear family. Around 54.27% lived with more than 6 family members indicating towards a joint family structure while 45.71% respondents' family member number was between 2 to 5 pointing towards a nuclear family. Most of the families were headed by the husband (60%) and the monthly income was mostly in the range of 10000 to 15000 tk (41.42%).

Table 2: *Causes of early marriage in rural area*

Variables	Frequency (N=400)	Percentage
Age of getting married		
8-10 years	00	0%
10-12 years	75	18.57%
12-15 years	194	48.57%
15-18 years	131	32.85%
Reasons of marriage*		
Family	251	62.85%
Economic	177	44.2%
Social	177	44.2%
Religious	74	18.57%
Influenced aspects for marriage*		
Self-opinion	74	18.57%
Family opinion	303	75.71%
Pressure from the groom's side	51	12.85%
Love relationship	57	14.28%

Any pressure from the groom’s family behind marriage*		
Financial inducement	109	27.14%
Threat of harm to family	57	14.28%
Fear of social disrespect	86	21.42%
No pressure	246	61.42%

*Multiple responses counted

Table 2 demonstrates the reasons of early marriage in rural areas. Around 48.57% of the total respondents got married in the ages of 12-15 years and 32.85% in the age group of 15-18 years. Majority of the respondents were married because of their family (62.85%) of the total respondents, 42.2% had economic or social reasons and the rest due to religious reasons. Respondents’ families were concerned about the safety of their daughters as a result of eve-teasing and negative attitude of society towards 18 or 20 years older girls which led to early marriages. In the assessment of influencing factors for early marriage, most of the respondents (75.71%) have been married as per their family’s choice and only 18.57% of the total respondents got married as per their self-choice, 12.85% due to pressure from the groom’s side and 14.28% as per their love relationship. Therefore, most of the respondents have no rights to take their own decision regarding their marriage. It is noticeable that 61% respondents opined they didn’t face any pressure from the groom’s family while 27% mentioned financial inducement and 21% explained social disrespect as responsible factors for early marriage.

Table 3: Psycho-Social Consequence of Early Marriage in Rural Area

Variables	Frequency (N=400)	Percentage
Kind of mental problems*		
Disappointment	149	37.14%
Depression	177	44.28%
Sadness	177	44.28%
Others	69	17.14%
No problem	63	15.71%
Kind of problems adapting in husbands’ family*		
Inefficiency in family work	189	47.14%
Defilement with family members	69	17.14%

Inability in adapting to surrounding condition	194	48.57%
No problem occurred	46	11.42%
Number of children in the family		
01	89	22.25%
02	183	45.75%
03	93	23.25%
More than 3	15	3.75%
No children	20	5%
Any kind of pressure to have children*		
Expectation of the grandparents	160	40%
Threat of physical torture	69	17.14%
Others	120	30%
No pressure	200	50%
Physical complication for being mother early*		
Malnutrition	171	42.85%
High pressure	109	27.14%
Excessive fatigue	154	38.57%
Others	51	12.85%
No problem occurred	97	24.28%
Effect on social relationship		
Deterioration of relations with friend	126	31.42%
Deterioration of relation with relatives	46	11.42%
Interference with freedom of movement	171	42.85%
No effect	57	14.28%
Effect on education		
Discontinuation of studies	172	42.85%
Regular	58	14.28%
Irregular	69	17.14%
Deterioration of results	58	14.28%
No effect	43	11.42%

*Multiple responses counted

Table 3 illustrates the psycho-social consequence of early marriage in rural area. It demonstrates that about 44% of the respondents were affected by depression and sadness. Disappointment was felt by 37% and 17.14% faced other mental problems. Regarding the kind of problems faced in husbands’ family, 48% respondents were unable in adapting to surrounding conditions or making a comfort environment for themselves. About 45.75% of respondents had only 2 children, 23.25% have 3 and 22.25% of the respondents have only 1 child and 5% had no child in their family. In recognizing the pressure of having a child it was seen that most of the families (50%) exerted no pressure to have a child, while 40% felt pressure of expectations of the grandparents. The main physical health complication of respondents was malnutrition which was about 42% of the respondents. During pregnancy, 31% of the women felt extreme fatigue. Early marriage greatly affects social relationship where 32% mentioned deterioration of relation with friends. As a result of early marriage 43% of the women lost their freedom and movement rights. Child marriage severely hinders the educational opportunities and development of women as they had to stop their study for early marriage. About 60% victims of child marriage were irregular in studies and dropped out while the others had deterioration of results. Only 25% victims were regular and had no effect on their studies.

Table 4: *Economic Consequence of Early Marriage in Rural Area*

Variables	Frequency (N=400)	Percentage
Kind of dowry		
Cash	177	44.28%
Motorcycle	51	12.85%
Land	23	5.71%
Others	52	12.85%
Not given	97	24.28%
Financial situation because of dowry		
In debt	206	51.42%
Landless	24	6%
Decline in savings	45	11.25%
No effect	125	31.14%
Source of money for dowry		
Savings	91	22.64%

Loan	242	60.37%
Half from relatives	38	9.4%
Others	29	7.5%
Amount of loan		
20-30 thousand	45	11.25%
31-50 thousand	88	22%
51-1 lakh	120	30%
More than 1 lakh	24	6%
No loan	123	30.75%
Economic status of family		
Low class	149	37.14%
Low-middle class	149	37.14%
Middle class	102	25.71%
High class		
Profession of the respondent's husband		
Farmer	120	30%
Day laborer	97	24.28%
Job holder	92	22.85%
Unemployed	17	4.2%
Others	74	18.57%

Table 4 shows the economic consequence of early marriage where most of the dowry (44%) was cash. Motorcycle and land were also given in 18% and 13% of the cases respectively. The only consolation was that the condition was getting better day by day as we found in this study with 24% of cases not giving any dowry. For providing dowry, about 60% families were affected where 51.42% family were in debt. The main economic source of dowry was loans (60.37%). Most of the families were in debt because of taking loan from the banks and money lenders. About 52% of the respondents' families had to borrow loan ranging from 31 thousand to 1 lakh tk. Besides 11.25% had to borrow loan from 20-30 thousand tk. Majority of the respondents (74.28%) belonged to low class & lower middle class. Most of the respondent's husband were farmer, which was about 30% of the total respondents, followed by daily laborers (24.28%), had a job (22.85%) and unemployed (4.2%).

Table 5: Relationship between Age of Getting Married and Other Physical and Mental Health Problems

Variable	8-10 Year	10-12 Year	12-15 Year	15-18 Year	p Value
Mental Health Problems					
Disappointment	105 (66.5)	69 (64.5)	50 (64.9)	22 (61.1)	0.005
Depression	14 (8.9)	7 (6.5)	12 (15.6)	7 (19.4)	
Sadness	11 (7.0)	12 (11.2)	7 (9.1)	1 (2.8)	
Others	11 (7.0)	11 (10.3)	1 (1.3)	1 (2.8)	
No problem	7 (4.4)	4 (3.7)	4 (5.2)	0 (0.0)	
Physical Healthy Complication					
Malnutrition	124 (38.3)	84 (36.7)	61 (35.1)	24 (32.0)	0.004
High pressure	19 (5.9)	11 (4.8)	8 (4.6)	3 (4.0)	
Excessive fatigue	62 (19.1)	49 (21.4)	37 (21.3)	14 (18.7)	
Others	36 (11.1)	25 (10.9)	21 (12.1)	10 (13.3)	
No problem occurred	22 (6.8)	13 (5.7)	10 (5.7)	5 (6.7)	

Table 5 shows that a statistically strong significant association was found between age of getting married and mental health problems ($p=0.005$). Besides, statistically significant associations were also found between age of getting married and other physical health problems ($p=0.004$). Hence, early marriage greatly affects the mental & physical health of the early married women/girls.

DISCUSSION

Early marriage, characterized as matrimony before the age of 18, persists as a pervasive concern in numerous developing countries, including Bangladesh. This research aims to delve into the intricate web of factors that contribute to early marriage in rural Bangladesh, as well as the subsequent psycho-social and health consequences and economic impacts on

individuals and society at large. It was seen that majority of respondent's age was between 15-25 years and average age of the respondents was 21 years. From a previous study we have found that majority of the respondents age was 20 to 24 years which aligns with our findings (Nasrin, 2012).

Findings revealed that although majority of respondents (54.28%) were educated till the primary level yet as they had an early marriage, they didn't get the opportunity to continue their study further because of family pressures and other reasons. As per a previous study there were 35.6% respondents with early marriage having primary level education (Patoari, 2020). So, the new finding of our study is that the rate of primary level education at first marriage has risen up. A prior report revealed that one-third of women aged 20 to 25 in Bangladesh were married by the age of 15, while approximately two-third were married by 18, diverging from our research findings (UNICEF, 2020). The study findings highlight that nearly 50% of women aged 20 to 25 in rural areas were married by 15, with only about 33% married by 18.

The study reveals that early marriages are mostly influenced by family attitudes toward societal norms (62.85%), followed by economic or social pressures (42.2%), and religious reasons (18.57%). Family concerns about issues like eve-teasing and societal biases contribute significantly. Marital decisions are predominantly shaped by family opinions (75.71%), while personal preferences account for only 18.57%. External factors such as groom's side pressure (12.85%) and love relationships (14.28%) also play a role. This emphasizes the need to empower individuals and challenge traditional norms to address the prevalence of early marriages driven by external influences. A previous study described poverty as the fundamental catalyst for child marriage in Bangladesh, perpetuating a vicious cycle where it emerges as both the leading cause and a consequential outcome. We differ from the finding that child marriage is directly connected with poverty. (Yount *et al.*, 2016). Another study stated social pressure, insecurity and natural disasters for the causes of child marriage in rural area in Bangladesh (Jain & Kurz, 2007) but we found that social disrespect and insecurity had only 35% role to play in child marriage. Moreover, most of the victim's families don't force or have any pressure for being married at an early age.

This study demonstrated that about 44% of the respondents were affected by depression and sadness followed by 37% were in a disappointing situation and 17.14% women faced other mental problems. So, it was seen that mostly women who got married early faced different

types of mental problems, which was not noticed by the people of rural areas. According to previous research, the rate of depression and anxiety was 50% and 32% respectively which is consistent with our research (Trommlerova, 2020). Our study elucidated that 45.75% of respondents had only 2 children and according to previous research 60.9% cases had 3 or more than 3 children (Kamal *et al.*, 2014).

The impact assessment of early marriage revealed various consequences. Around 50% of families don't pressure childbirth, while nearly in 40% of cases grandparents expectation exerted pressure. Notably, malnutrition affects 42%, with 22% facing excessive pressure requiring frequent doctor visits. Respondents experienced extreme pregnancy fatigue, indicating malnutrition's prevalence during this phase. Socially, there was strained friendships due to early marriage, and loss of freedom and movement rights. According to previous research there was no impact on respondent's relationship after marriage it's about 20% which is consistent with our study (Abdullah *et al.* 2015). In continuing education, the consequences were concerning where roughly 60% of the cases discontinue studies, leading to irregular attendance, dropouts, and poorer performance. This highlights the urgency of addressing these dire consequences and providing vital support to those affected by early marriage.

Our study also focused on dowry and its relation to early marriage in Bangladesh. Findings indicated that 44% of dowries were cash-based, while 18% comprised motorcycles and 13% included land. Positive progress was noted over time, with 24% of cases not giving dowries. Dowry practices had a substantial impact on families as around 60% of families were affected, with 51.42% in debt. Loans emerged as the primary source with majority borrowing 31 thousand to 1 lakh tk., followed by 20-30 thousand tk. This was concerning as majority of the respondents belonged to low/lower-middle classes. Early marriage entrenches the poverty cycle, as girls who married young are frequently marginalized from economic opportunities. The World Bank reported that women aged 20 to 24 years who married before turning 18 earned 26% less than those who married later (Nahid, 2014). According to previous research about 41.6% of husbands in rural areas were not educated and employed that means they led poor life which is consistent with our study which revealed the main profession as a farmer, followed by daily laborer and job holder (Chowdhury, 2004).

CONCLUSION

In summary, the study unveils the intricate repercussions of early marriage in rural Bangladesh. Focusing on its causal factors, psycho-social and health aftermath, and economic implications, the research offers crucial insights. The study underscores the persistence of early marriage as a substantial issue; predominantly affecting individuals aged 15 to 25. Education, primarily at the primary level, faces hindrance due to societal norms and familial pressures. Notably, a shift towards reduced prevalence of early marriages over time is evident. Family attitudes, economic strains, and societal norms emerge as pivotal determinants for early marriage. These factors drive decisions, often yielding distressing outcomes. Mental health challenges, especially depression, are prevalent among early-married women. Impacts encompass diverse facets, influencing family dynamics, health, and education. The urgency of interventions and support mechanisms is highlighted to counter early marriage's adverse effects. Empowerment and norm-challenging efforts are pivotal for catalyzing positive transformations. Furthermore, the study delves into the economic intricacies of early marriage, accentuating the burden of dowries. Cash-based dowries, financial pressures, and ensuing debts highlight the necessity for policy reforms. Families, engaged in farming and day labor, experience cyclical economic repercussions of early marriage. In essence, this study calls for action, urging a comprehensive approach via education, awareness, and policy amendments to dismantle the cycle of early marriage and its widespread impacts. These findings pave the way for an equitable and empowered future for rural Bangladesh's individuals and communities.

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