

A Sociological Analysis of Trends in Child Marriage during the Covid-19 Epidemic

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Abstract - The primary method through which people build families and societies is through marriage. A man must be 21 years old to marry in Bangladesh, while a woman must be 18 years old. In the aftermath of the Covid-19 outbreak, the number of underage marriages in rural regions increased dramatically (defined as those under 18). The objective of this study is to know the trends and reasons for the increase. However, regardless of the cause of child marriage, young people who are victims of child marriage face several physical and mental hazards, affecting future generations of the country in different ways. Finally, in light of the research findings, some recommendations are presented which will help formulate future policies and programs to prevent child marriage.

Index Terms - Child, Child-Marriage, Rural Society, Covid-19, Pandemic.

I. INTRODUCTION

There are immediate and long-term consequences for young females who enter into marriage at a young age (below 18). Both marital violence and dropping out of school are more common for them. The likelihood of an unintended early pregnancy increases with child marriage, increasing the likelihood of maternal problems and mortality. By isolating girls from their family, friends, and communities, the practice has the potential to undermine their mental health and wellbeing. 100 million girls continued to be in danger of child marriage ten years after the COVID-19 epidemic, despite considerable drops in several nations recently. "COVID-19 has exacerbated a perilous situation for millions of girls. Closing schools, severing ties to social networks, and increased poverty have all exacerbated a global crisis that many people were already trying to control. The effects of COVID-19 on young women are profound. The epidemic has restricted girls' access to medical care, welfare care, and community support that protect them from underage marriage, unexpected pregnancies, and gender-based violence. Women are more likely to quit school altogether if they are forced to close down. As a result of job losses and growing economic insecurity, some families may feel compelled to marry off their daughters to help with household expenses (UNICEF, 2021). The government of Bangladesh has committed to end child marriage but has not yet taken the required steps to do so. Therefore, there are a total of 38 million child brides in Bangladesh. This number includes both those who are now married and those who were child brides for the first time. They had 13 million weddings with brides under the age of 15. Premarital marriage is common among young women in Bangladesh, with 51% of brides being under the age of 18. Both the government goal of eliminating child marriage by 2041 and the Sustainable Development Goal target of eliminating it by 2030 will require substantial effort. If the national target is to be met, then progress must occur eight times more quickly than in the previous decade; if the Sustainable Development Goal aims to be realized, then progress must occur seventeen times more quickly (UNICEF, 2020).

Underage marriage has been illegal in Bangladesh since 1929, and the minimum age of consent for women is now 18, while for men it is 21. Nonetheless, Bangladesh has the world's fourth-highest rate of child marriages (under the age of 18), after only Chad, Niger, and the Central African Republic. There are a lot of young brides in Bangladesh; 65 percent of them are younger than 18 (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Because of the recent coronavirus outbreak, the number of child marriages in Bangladesh has increased, and it is feared that the government may not be able to end this practice anytime soon. Even though Bangladesh had made great strides toward eliminating child marriage before the epidemic, the pervasive fear and concern amongst parents as a consequence of the epidemic, employment, hunger, and food insecurity has led to a rise in child weddings. Experts are worried that if families aren't given the resources to avoid the practice of child marriage, girls will drop out of school once the pandemic is over (Sakib, 2021).

As opposed to being a problem only at the national level, child marriage is becoming a topic for discussion among world leaders. This issue impacts a large number of countries, and Bangladesh is leading the charge to find a solution. As a result of gender inequality, poverty, societal expectations, and instability, child and teen marriage have devastating effects on a nation's democratic, economic, socioeconomic, and environmental systems. There are a number of causes of child marriage, but the spread of the COVID-19 epidemic has certainly accelerated its development. This study aims to evaluate the prevalence of child marriages in Bangladesh during the current Covid-19 epidemic and to provide solutions for mitigating or eliminating this social issue.

II. The rationale of the Study

In Bangladesh, child marriage is a major social issue. Child marriage is a phenomenon that illustrates the persistent gender inequality in society. In Bangladesh, women are often looked upon as a drain on the family budget. Many parents believe that if a girl gets married, the burden on the family will be reduced, thus marrying off at a young age. Many people marry a girl at a young age because of the fear of having to pay a dowry. The country as well as the whole world is in turmoil due to the Corona epidemic. Covid-19 has been at the center of our mourning for more than two years but behind this epidemic, another epidemic like child marriage is going on in the country. Day by day this is increasing at a compound rate. Although child marriage is old in the country, it has now become an epidemic. Because schools have been shuttered for over a year, young people are increasingly likely to get married young. Especially in rural areas, there is a boom in child marriage due to Corona. Somewhere domestically and somewhere else everything is happening in a pompous manner. There are several reasons for child marriage ranging from poverty and religious bigotry. Many families want to marry off girls quickly due to poverty, which has increased the number of doing so. Besides, there are crimes like raising the age. There are also offenses such as rising the age of birth registration to avoid child marriages, which are linked to municipal or union council workers. Marriage registrars also cannot avoid this responsibility. Students are dropping out of child marriages and due to unequal marriages; they are facing health risks and problems. We need to be more active in preventing child marriage. Both the government and the private

sector must be vigilant because child marriage is enough to make the country backward. Such research will help us to prevent future child marriages in Bangladesh.

III. Problem Statement

Marriage is a social and religious bond or legal contract by which a conjugal relationship is established between two adult men and women. Marriage is an institution through which intimate and sexual relations between two men and women gain social recognition. Child marriage affects both girls and boys, but girls are more affected. Especially due to low socioeconomic status, most child marriages involve only one minor. Child marriage has several root causes, including financial hardship, cultural norms, legal sanction, societal pressure, religious and cultural beliefs, fear of being alone, a lack of education, and an assumption that girls cannot support themselves financially. These kinds of incidents are often happening in our society these days. As a result of marrying at an immature age, married girls do not want to return to their husband's houses in most cases and their marriage is ended through a divorce. Child marriage is the leading cause of most maternal deaths and child deaths. According to experts, the risk of death of teenage mothers is four times higher than that of adults. When a minor girl becomes a mother without adequate knowledge of how to care for the child, this increases child mortality. In addition, due to child marriage, there are many negative effects such as violence against women, reproductive health problems, premature pregnancy, and risk of death during childbirth, a decrease in female education rate, an increase in the school dropout rate, decrease in the ability and opportunity of women to become economically independent.

A rise in early marriage in Bangladesh has been linked to an uptick in domestic violence, teen suicide, and broken families as a result of the recent Covid-19 outbreak. However, there is a lot of literature on child marriage and its impacts on society in Bangladesh but how the trends are during the Covid-19 pandemic situation is not illustrated. Hence, the study is an attempt to investigate the present state of child marriage trends and its effects during the Covid-19 pandemic situation.

IV. Research Questions

There are some following research questions in aiming to answer throughout the research process.

1. What is the pattern of child marriage in Bangladesh during the CoVD-19 pandemic?
2. What is the socio-economic and demographic status of child-married women in Bangladesh?
3. What are the causes of increasing child marriage in the Covid-19 pandemic situation and what are their effects?
4. What are the probable steps that can be taken to prevent child marriage in Bangladesh?

V. Research Objective

Because of the current covid-19 outbreak, this study aims to take a closer look at the statistics and dynamics of child marriage in Bangladesh. The study has a broad objective; with various secondary objectives that will assist it get there:

- To know about the socio-economic status of child-married women
- To know about the causes of increasing child marriage and its effects during the Covid-19 pandemic situation
- To recommend some steps that can be taken to prevent child marriage

VI. Literature Review

The relevant literature of the study as reviewed is divided into two parts commonly known as theoretical review and empirical review.

- i. **Theoretical Review:** The main focus of this part was theories that serve as the study's foundation in terms of variables.

Child Marriage: The Indian subcontinent is not immune to the social practice of child marriage. It is the way to start a conjugal life of two people where one or both may be immature to get married. Therefore, any legal or illegal union between a minor under the age of 18 for females and 21 for males in Bangladesh and an adult or another minor is referred to as child marriage (Save the Children, 2022).

Covid-19 Pandemic: In the 1930s, scientists identified the very first coronavirus. The infectious disorders that are collectively referred to as coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) are caused by the coronavirus 2 virus, which is also the pathogen that is responsible for SARS (SARS-CoV-2). In December of 2019, Wuhan, China was the location of the first known case of the disease. The rapid spread of the disease across the world was the root cause of the COVID-19 pandemic (Mohiuddin, 2020).

- ii. **Empirical Review:** This section mainly focused on the pieces of literature that are most relevant to the present research study, especially child marriage trends during the Covid-19 pandemic situation and its consequences among various socio-economic sectors for Bangladesh aspects.

During the height of the outbreak in Bangladesh, a telephone poll was conducted in rural areas to investigate the impact of the lockdown and school closures that were caused by the COVID-19 virus on children. The shutdown's effects on children's leisure time, subsequent academic plans, and the prevalence of underage marriages were the primary topics of the survey. The study reveals that the effects of lockdown and school closing vary depending on the gender of the child and the nature of the shocks. During the school stoppage, it was determined that children spent less time studying and more time performing housework. These alterations were far more dramatic for girls than for boys. After recovering from a respiratory infection at home, children had a lower likelihood of returning to school, but teenage girls were much more likely to raise the subject of marriage. Last but not least, the findings should serve as a warning about the possible long-term effects that the epidemic could have on women in developing countries (Makino et al., 2021). Child marriage is a significant social issue in Bangladesh, as well as the ongoing COVID-19 epidemic has made the issue far more severe. There has been at least a thirteen percent rise in the incidence of child marriage as a direct result of the widespread shutdown of schools brought on by the epidemic; however, many more instances of child marriage go unreported. The worsening of the financial crisis, the prolonged closing of education institutions, and the accompanying social instability are the key factors that have led to such a high rate of child marriages (Hossain et al., 2021). The incidence of child marriage, unwanted births, and sexual assault against women in Bangladesh has all increased dramatically since 2020 (Islam & Hossain, 2021). When Bangladesh remained a British dominion, in 1929, the government outlawed child marriage via the Child Marriage Restraint Act. The practice persisted despite legal prohibitions against it. The legislation intended to end the practice has also been criticized for promoting more underage marriages. The government of Bangladesh passed the Childhood Marriage Restraint Act of 2017, which provides guidelines permitting females under the age of 18 to marry if they have acquired guardian consent in certain circumstances (Vargas et al., 2021). Once schools have finally resumed operations, the economic effects of the epidemic are also reducing the likelihood that girls will return to them. Children and teachers

who are hungry must leave the classroom to find food or a way to pay for it. Children who are hungry during class cannot focus. Many kids never return. And in a perilous cycle, girls from lower-income households who are not in school are more likely to experience starvation and child marriage (ICRW, 2016). While food insecurity might occasionally lead to child marriage, the practice can also feed the cycle of hunger and food insecurity. Compared to girls who marry later in life, those who marry young have greater rates of anemia and malnutrition. Children born to mothers who are adolescents have a higher risk of being born with a low birth weight, being malnourished, and having stunted growth. Due to the fact that teenage female breasts are still expanding and developing, there may be some competition for resources and energy between the adolescent woman and the developing fetus (ICRW, 2017). According to a research on child marriage provided by UNICEF on International Women's Day, vulnerable girls are inevitably coerced into marriage during the Covid-19 pandemic as a result of a rise in school closures, financial difficulties, service disruptions, pregnancy, and parental deaths (Vinayaka, 2021). The COVID-19 epidemic, which began as a health catastrophe in Bangladesh, rapidly escalated into an economic, social, and then humanitarian calamity. Bangladesh's government issued "general holidays" commencing March 18, 2020, to slow the spread of COVID-19. The rigorous lockdown was relaxed just over two months later when the epidemic was still in its early stages. Bangladesh, like so many other nations, was forced to make a difficult decision because the lockdown necessary to stop the disease's spread nearly destroyed the economy and increased poverty and famine (Das and Women, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic is making it difficult for people to carry out any economic, social, or other activity. This is a challenging time for the entire world. Different kinds of socioeconomic issues surfaced in this situation and deepened. Additionally, there are more criminals and criminal activity. Since the pandemic's outbreak, society has witnessed new kinds of crimes. In the current pandemic condition, violence against women and girls, including rape, gang rape, eve teasing, emotional and physical abuse, and harassment, has greatly grown, especially in child marriage (Mahbub, 2020). Child marriage is more common among girls who live in rural areas, are geographically isolated, and come from families that earn less than the federal poverty threshold. However, numerous researches suggest that the prevalence of child marriage practices increases during times of natural disasters and other types of crises. This has an especially negative impact on young women. The study seeks to determine the direct causes of arranged marriages during COVID-19, in addition to how the lockdown time induced by COVID-19 impacts marriage decisions. There is a definite association between child marriage, school closures, and declining family earnings, all of which inflict additional stress on families. Due to the lengthy lockdown and recent depictions of girls being forced to get married in rural regions as a result of a pandemic, this study will investigate whether individuals are pressing their daughters to marry young (Meem & Yasmin, 2020). In these five nations (Bangladesh, Brazil, Ethiopia, India, and Nigeria), the total number of new child marriages may range anywhere from 3.5 million to 4.9 million under the uncontrolled scenario, but would be in the range of 1.8 million to 2.7 million under the mitigated scenario. The increased danger would last until 2035, which is ten years later than the baseline prediction (Yukich et al., 2021). In the first nine months of 2020, there were 84% fewer child weddings than in the same period of 2019. There were 219 percent fewer child marriages prevented in the third quarter of 2020, when the COVID-19 outbreak was at its height, compared to the same quarter in 2019. Between the first and third quarters of 2020, there were 571 fewer child marriages (BRAC Press Release, 2020). During the period of the coronavirus pandemic, child marriage has returned to certain regions of Bangladesh as a result of the shutdown of educational institutions to prevent its spread. The school meals program once encouraged poor families in the country's interior to send their children to school, thereby reducing their financial burden (BEBU, 2021). In 2021, compared to the previous year, there was a 10% increase in the number of girls aged 15 to 19 who wed. In response to the effects of Covid-19, 27% of girls in this age group married within two years (Correspondent, 2022). While the Covid-19 pandemic affected virtually every sector of life, secondary school female students in the United States were among the hardest hit. In 2021, according to a government assessment, around 80,000 female students became child laborers and nearly 50,000 of them became victims of underage marriage (Alamgir, 2022). Child marriage has disrupted the education of female students, regardless of whether COVID-19 is contained at this time. To achieve effective prevention, mitigation, and local reaction, it is vital that regularly updated and unequally disseminated data on sexual identity abuse and child marriage be accessible (Bellizzi et al., 2021). Before girls are emotionally and cognitively prepared to adapt to their new environment as in-laws, they marry. They are frequently subjected to various forms of torture, such as violence associated with dowries. Due to their young age, they are at a significant risk of becoming pregnant or delivering birth. Again, many of them have no knowledge of reproductive health or contraception. As a result, their infant mortality rate is somewhat greater. Malnutrition or anemia is another significant cause of maternal death following childbirth (Independent, n.d.). Millions of adolescents have missed school since the beginning of the outbreak. The majority of women marry after completing their education, whilst males begin working to help support their families. These factors ultimately halted a path that led to fewer employment opportunities, uncertain economic situations, long-term liberty, and the ongoing evolution of the youth labor force. Based on a literature analysis from Bangladesh, this study tries to determine the influence of COVID-19 on the increase in child marriages and dropout rates, as well as how it threatens the achievement of the SDGs (Hussain, 2021).

VII. Research Methods

This study is mainly an exploratory and social sample survey. Though several secondary sources were linked primary data has been used to conduct the study. In the data collection process, there are eight villages were selected from two unions of Dhamrai Upazila under the Dhaka district. Data required for the study were collected from selected rural child-married women. Therefore, the unit of analysis for this research is child-married women who have been child-married during the Covid-19 pandemic situation. The sample size of the respondents is 40 those were selected from the eight villages. In order to collect data, a semi-structured questionnaire of 28 questions was administered to a sample of respondents, who were given a series of questions about their demographic, educational, socioeconomic, pre- and post-marriage physical and mental health. Moreover, to enrich the study their interview and opinion regarding child marriage and its effects were collected. A statistical tool like MS Excel has been mostly used in finding, analyzing, and presenting results from the collected data. Finally, this study follows a qualitative and quantitative study with a descriptive research design.

Table 1: Demographic and Socio-Economic Features of the Respondents

Indicators	Determinants	Percent (%), when N= 40
Age (Years)	10 - 11	5 %
	12 - 13	10 %
	14 - 15	47.5 %
	16 – Below 18	37.5 %
Education	Class 5- Class 6	5 %
	Class 7- Class 8	12.5 %
	Class 9 - Class 10	52.5 %
	Class 11 - Class 12	30 %
Occupation	Student	17.5 %
	Housewife	72.5 %
	Others	10 %
Family Head's Monthly Income	Below Tk. 5,000	5 %
	Tk. 5,000- 10,000	25 %
	Tk. 10,000- 15,000	45 %
	Tk. 15,000 – 20,000	17.5 %
	Tk. 20,000 – 25,000	7.5 %

Demographic and socio-economic feature of the respondents includes age, education, occupation, and monthly income of their family head. From the response of the respondents, it can be concluded that the child marriage victims aged between 10-18 years. Most of them are between 14-15 years which represents 47.5% as a whole. Then the second highest is 16 to below 18 years which represents 37.5%. Aggregately these two age limits cover 82% of the respondents and the remaining 18% includes 5% for 10-11 years and 10% for 12-13 years. The research data also indicate the education level of the respondents while they get married and the surprising fact is that in class 9-10 they get married which represents 52.5% or more than half. 30% of them get married when they are in class 11-12. Even some of them get married at their childhood age when they are in class 5-6 and class 7-8 and the percentage is 5% and 12.5% respectively. The respondents also acknowledge their occupation in giving their socio-economic data. Most of the respondents (72.5%) are housewives, 17.5% are a student and are continuing their studies, and the remaining 10% of respondents are doing jobs in various sectors like- readymade garments. The research study also found the economic scenario of the respondent's family, especially their family head's monthly income. But the shocking fact is three a fourth of the total respondent's family head's income is less than tk. 15000 and the proportion is 5% for families with a monthly income below tk. 5000, 25% of respondents agree that their monthly income between tk. 5000-10000, and 45 respondents said that their father's monthly earnings between tk. 10000-15000. 17.5% of respondents gave their consent to that their family income is between tk. 15000-20000. Only a few respondents' family incomes are greater than tk. 20000 and the percentage is 7.5 for tk. 20000-25000.

Table 2: Causes of Child Marriage in the Covid-19 Pandemic

Indicators	Determinants	Percent (%), when N= 40
Employment crisis of parents	12	30 %
Lack of social security	7	17.5 %
Closure of educational institutions for a long time	9	22.5 %
Family pressure	6	15 %
Having the groom is from abroad	4	10 %
Lack of interference from the local administration	2	5 %

Generally, child marriage occurs due to illiteracy, superstition, dowry, poverty, etc., but during the period of Covid-19, some other reasons are found in addition to the aforementioned reasons for child marriage. The survey showed that 30 percent of the respondents in the research area attributed the employment and financial crisis of the family to child marriage due to the long-term lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic situation. 17.5% of the respondents cited child marriage as a result of child rape, sexual abuse, increased social insecurity, etc. during the Corona period. 23 percent of the respondents felt that child marriage was caused due to prolonged closure of educational institutions and future uncertainty. 15% of the respondents think that child marriage is due to a lack of awareness of family heads, considering the daughter as a burden, the low cost of marriage during the Corona period, family pressure, etc. Due to the lockdown in various countries, many expatriate workers returned to the country and 10 percent of respondents cited getting them as brides as a reason for marriage. Besides, during the time of Corona, the local administration was busy dealing with the disaster of the Covid-19 epidemic, so they paid less attention to child marriage, of which 5 percent of the respondents felt that child marriage took place.

IX. Effects of Child Marriage

With all other problems in the Covid-19 pandemic, teenage girls face various physical and psychological problems due to child marriage. A summary of some of the problems and their significance is discussed in the following tables:

Table 3: Physical Problems

Indicators	Determinants	Percent (%), when N= 40
Sexual violence	11	27.5 %
Unplanned pregnancy	9	22.5 %
Malnutrition problems	6	15 %
Birth of malnourished and premature babies	4	10 %
Victims of domestic violence	10	25 %

Data from the study area shows that the Covid-19 epidemic in Bangladesh has resulted in a number of medical problems for adolescent females who were married off too young. Among them, 27.5 percent of respondents experience sexual violence, 25 percent of respondents experience various forms of domestic violence, 22.5 percent of respondents experience an unplanned pregnancy, 15 percent of respondents experience malnutrition, and 10 percent of respondents give birth to malnourished and premature babies.

Table 4: Psychological Problems

Indicators	Determinants	Percent (%), when N= 40
Not happy to have a husband	5	12.5 %
Sexual relations are not pleasurable	7	17.5 %
Mental torture due to dowry in various ways	8	20 %
Not taking their opinion in family decision making	9	22.5 %
Lack of access to sexual and reproductive health rights	11	27.5 %

Respondents reported they are experiencing various psychological problems as a result of child marriage. Most respondents (27.5%) said they do not receive sexual and reproductive health rights as a result of early marriage; 22.5% said they are not given importance in any type of family decision-making, including the adoption of children; 20% said they are psychologically abused as a result of dowry; and 17.5% said they were unhappy with their sexual relationship because they were married at a young age.

X. Conclusion and Recommendations

The term "coronavirus," also known as "Covid-19," is widely used today. It has wreaked havoc on economies around the world and had far-reaching societal consequences. Its sway extended all the way to Bangladesh. The epidemic has made existing gender disparities much worse. The closure of schools in Bangladesh because of an outbreak of the coronavirus or Covid-19, a lack of or drop in parental income, an increase in the incidence of violence, and other factors have all led to the rise in the number of cases of child marriage in the country. A girl child is denied the right to education as a result of child marriage. There are various complications related to pregnancy, and malnutrition-related diseases of children and mothers are increasing which is questioning the overall public health system of the country.

Although various steps have been taken over the years to prevent child marriage, it is important to take ground-breaking steps in the special context of Covid-19, because teenage girls are in the most vulnerable position during any disaster and crisis. They need to focus and proactively determine ways to deal with emergencies.

Some policy measures can be taken to improve or overcome the situation as follows:

- We should think about bringing the financial solvency of the families.
- The importance of women's education should be brought forward in establishing the social status of women.
- Child marriage is one of the reasons why girls drop out of educational institutions and the ignorance of parents is largely responsible for this. In this case, teachers can counsel families.
- Girls are often married at an advanced age with fake birth registrations. This certificate is given by public representatives. Along with awareness in this regard, effective steps should be taken.
- The campaign for the prevention of child marriage law should be increased and proper initiatives should be taken to implement the law.
- Corona or Covid-19 pandemic is not the only one to blame. In addition to Corona or Covid-19 pandemic, we need to shed light on the prevailing views and thoughts of society.

Although the corona infection has decreased, we are still not completely risk-free. So, we have to pay attention that Corona or Covid-19 cannot have such a harmful effect on the lives of teenagers again. A national plan should be adopted by all the organizations working locally. Child marriage is just an obstacle in the way of women's education whereas it is the major drawback in the country's development process. If the Bangladesh government wants to achieve the SDGs target by 2030, it must take steps to prevent child marriage; otherwise, the overall development of the society is not possible without the safety and development of a greater portion of the total population.

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