



## An Alarming Upswing in Child Marriage in Bangladesh: Causes, Consequences and Remedy

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### ABSTRACT

Child marriage in Bangladesh is the top burning issue in the world. From 1990 to 2017, the number of child marriages was decreasing. Last few years, this number has been increasing from the lowest-income households and some from highest highest-income families. It is a serious violation of human rights and affects on the health, education, economy, and well-being of the girls. Most of them have experience with psychological, physical, and social complexities. It was needed to find out why this trend (child marriage) is upswing in Bangladesh. Data have been collected from secondary sources and analyzed thematically. The results show that natural disasters play an important role. In addition, the misuse of technology, more time with peer groups, emotional stage, and boundless lifestyle are the most significant factors in the upswing of child marriage in Bangladesh. Though the government of Bangladesh formulated many laws and regulations to abolish child marriage from Bangladesh but these factors pull this system. It is high time to eradicate child marriage from Bangladesh. Policymakers and new researchers can benefit from this article.

Keywords: Child marriage, Upswing, Bangladesh, Broken family.

### 1. Introduction

The rapid growth of child marriage is very harmful to the well-being of the girl's children in Bangladesh. This is inhumane and a violation of human rights and the laws that some areas practice as social norms. The girl children are the victims of this bad practice that deprived of their educational rights, personal freedom, and their empowerment to develop as proper human beings (Ferdous, 2013). A legal or informal union in which one or more of the partners is under the age of eighteen is referred to as a child marriage. "Early marriage means the sudden end of childhood and is a violation of children's rights," (Knipp, 2019). Any official or informal partnership in which one or both partners are under the age of 18 is considered a child marriage (UNICEF, 2023). It is acknowledged as a violation of human rights because it denies kids the chance to grow to their full potential, make decisions about their future, and take advantage of their rights to protection, health care, and education (Backe-Hansen & Falch-Eriksen, 2018).

Globally, child marriage is a common practice, even in the most developed and wealthy countries. However, South Asia, areas of Central America, and sub-Saharan Africa, even in some parts of the USA are where it is most prevalent (Voice of America, 2019). Child marriage is a serious worldwide problem that impacts 12 million girls per year, mostly in low-income nations. Their potential is severely restricted by this practice, which also compromises health, interferes with education, and keeps people in poverty for years to come (UNICEF, 2023). Almost half of all child brides worldwide are from South Asia, which places a heavy load on the region. This enduring problem is mostly caused by ingrained cultural customs, gender disparity, and financial difficulties (The World Bank, 2017 & 2024). Approximately 290 million child brides belong in South Asia, making up 45% of the global population. The table below illustrates the prevalence of child marriage in South Asian countries as of June 2024:

Table 1: Child Marriage in South Asian Countries

Country	Percentage of Women (20-24 yrs.) Married Before 18
Bangladesh	51%
India	27%
Nepal	40%
Pakistan	21%
Sri Lanka	12%

Source: Plan International, 2024; Save the Children, 2024

The above table shows that the prevalence of child marriage in Bangladesh is the highest in all South Asian countries as well as among the highest globally. In Bangladesh, despite legislative initiatives and socioeconomic progress, the rate of child marriage persists at an alarming level. 51% of girls were married before turning 18 as of June 2024, underscoring the difficulty of ending this detrimental trend (Ahamed, 2024 & NIPORT, 2023). Girls and women in Bangladesh face numerous barriers to growth because of the pervasive gender inequality in the country's sociocultural context. Girls are viewed as financial liabilities by their families and are given less attention, care, and resources from the moment of birth (UNDP, 2023).

Table 2: Percentages of child marriage

Year	Married before 18 (%)	Married before 15 (%)
2023	41.6	8.2
2022	40.9	6.5
2021	32.4	4.7
2020	31.3	4.9

Source: UNDP, 2023

Recently, a report published by UNICEF (2023) found that approximately 66 percent of girls are married off before 18 years old in Bangladesh. In addition, the Daily Star (2024) reported that 41.6% of girls are married off before 18 years old.

It is nothing new in Bangladesh rather it is deeply embedded in the improvised and traditional cultural settings.

Table 3: Child Marriage Before age 18 (in Percent) in Bangladesh.

Indicators	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2010	2000
Rural	62.1	44.4	42.9	33.8	34.6	81.8	94.1
Urban	40.2	33.5	34.9	28.2	27.6	69.0	73.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>51.1</b>	<b>41.6</b>	<b>40.9</b>	<b>32.4</b>	<b>31.3</b>	<b>75.1</b>	<b>83</b>

Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), 2024

The Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017, is the main law to prevent child marriage, defines the legal marriage age is 21 for boys and 18 for girls. So, marriage below 18 for girls and 21 for boys is considered an offense. In practice, most of the time, the legal minimum age at marriage is ignored especially for girls. After the enactment of the Act, the National Action Plan to run programs for decreasing the child marriage rate (NAPECM, 2018). Due to insufficient implementation of the law, teenage marriages have continued to have a detrimental effect on girls' health, education, and opportunities for the future (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Currently, the Upswing of child marriage is very alarming news for the country. It is high time to identify the factors why this social problem is coming back again. Considering the overall issues, this area has been selected to highlight the critical and growing issue of child marriage in Bangladesh. It is essential to explore the reasons behind its increase and find solutions to mitigate its detrimental effects on young girls and society at large. Effectively addressing this situation will require a multimodal strategy that includes legal, educational, economic, and cultural measures.

## 2. Objective of the study

The primary objective of this article is to examine the underlying causes of the recent rise in child marriage in Bangladesh, assess its consequences on individuals and communities, and propose effective remedies to eliminate this practice.

## 3. Methodology

This is a qualitative study and content analysis of child marriage in Bangladesh. This study employs a literature-based approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to child marriage in Bangladesh and to evaluate potential solutions. For this study, firstly, relevant sources are located by conducting library-based research. Secondly, content analysis is undertaken when analyzing resources to explore a comprehensive analysis of child marriage in Bangladesh and to develop practical, context-based recommendations for reducing the prevalence of this harmful practice. Literature of the last 30 years has been analyzed and found the exact causes of increasing child marriage in Bangladesh. This issue requires urgent attention from the government and the public.

#### 4. Causes of the Alarming Upswing in Child Marriage in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, child marriage is still a major social problem, and current statistics point to a concerning rise in its occurrence. In the early stages of Bangladesh, child marriage was too high and later it gradually decreased.

Table 4: Child Marriage Before age 18 (in Percent)

Indicators	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2010	2000
Rural	62.1	44.4	42.9	33.8	34.6	81.8	94.1
Urban	40.2	33.5	34.9	28.2	27.6	69.0	73.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>51.1</b>	<b>41.6</b>	<b>40.9</b>	<b>32.4</b>	<b>31.3</b>	<b>75.1</b>	<b>83</b>
Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), 2024							

The table below 04 shows that child marriage was the worst situation in 2000. This rate sharply decreased to 31.3 percent in 2020. Unfortunately, this rate is again increasing gradually, whereas women's education and maternal health in Bangladesh are much better than in previous years. In this regard, much literature has been reviewed to identify the rapid growth of child marriage in Bangladesh. Some important factors have been identified.

##### Economic Hardship and Poverty

Poverty is a fundamental driver of child marriage in Bangladesh. Many families see marrying off their daughters as a way to reduce financial burdens and secure their future. The economic instability worsened and increased financial insecurity among families (Fattah & Camellia, 2022). This pressure compels many to marry off their daughters early, seeing it as a cost-saving measure and a way to ensure their daughter's financial security through marriage. In addition, poverty is always considered as the main path, and girls are seen as a burden on the family economy. Most of poor families see alternatives that cannot afford their daughters rather seen as the burden of the family and always view child marriage to ensure the financial security of their families and to ensure the rights of their daughters to other families (Patoari, 2020). 'Most of the families think marriage is a way to ensure that their daughters are 'protected', as parents feel their daughters will be better off financially and safer from sexual abuse or illicit sexual contact than if they are married' (Ferdousi, 2013). This growth is the result of numerous interrelated variables that reflect intricate socioeconomic dynamics, cultural norms, and inadequacies in policy.

##### Dowry System

The practice of dowry, despite being illegal, remains widespread. Younger brides typically require smaller dowries, motivating families to marry off their daughters at a younger age to minimize dowry expenses. In Bangladesh, still some districts practice dowry as their social norm. If the girls are educated and doing jobs, dowry is a must. In this regard, the parents of daughters think to marry off early (Arnab & Siraj, 2020).

##### Cultural Norms, social status, and gender inequality

Cultural practices play a crucial role in perpetuating child marriage. In many communities, early marriage is seen as a way to enhance a family's social status and honor. The perceived need to preserve a girl's virginity until marriage adds pressure to marry daughters off at an early age. It is an honor for a man to marry a teenage girl (Naced et al., 2022). Otherwise, society has a negative perception. Uddin (2021) mentioned that society expects their neighborhood to marry off their daughter at an early stage otherwise they are seen badly. Besides, Deep-seated patriarchal norms prioritize the roles of girls as wives and mothers, often at the expense of their education and personal development. This cultural mindset perpetuates the acceptance of child marriage as a normative practice. Educated and employed women always do not obey their parent's or husband orders. Consequently, the mindset among the men is to pick the younger lady as their life partners (Rahman, 2024). Gender inequality underpins many cases of child marriage. The subordinate status of women in many parts of Bangladesh means that decisions regarding a girl's marriage are often made without her consent or consideration of her personal aspirations. The societal expectation for girls to prioritize marriage and family over personal development perpetuates the cycle of child marriage.

##### Lack of Education and Awareness

Limited access to education significantly contributes to the continuation of child marriage. High dropout rates among girls, particularly in rural areas, leave them more vulnerable to early marriage. Lack of education reduces their opportunities for economic independence and increases reliance on marriage for financial stability. Some unavoidable hazards, many parents do not feel interested in sending their daughters to school. The key statistics on child marriage and education dropout rates in Bangladesh are presented below.

Table 5: Key Statistics on Child Marriage and Education Dropout Rates in Bangladesh

Statistic	Percentage
Girls married before the age of 18	51%

Girls married before the age of 15	16%
Girls dropping out of school	40%
Child marriage rate in rural areas	60%+

Source: Islam, 2021.

In addition, awareness is another important factor in child marriage. The adverse effects of child marriage on girls' health, education, and general well-being are not well-known to families. The cycle of early marriage is sustained by this ignorance (ICDDR, 2013).

### Legal and Policy Challenges

Ineffective enforcement of laws and inadequate policy frameworks also facilitate the persistence of child marriage. Although laws against child marriage exist, weak enforcement and the prevalence of informal and unregistered marriages undermine these legal protections. The criminal who violates the laws gets bail within a few days which is the lack of proper implementation of laws (Ashadujjaman & Akter, 2017). Corruption and lack of accountability further impede effective enforcement. There are gaps in policy that fail to address the root causes of child marriage, such as poverty and lack of access to education. Insufficient social safety nets and support systems for vulnerable families exacerbate the problem.

### Impact of Natural Disasters and Climate Change

Bangladesh's vulnerability to natural disasters and climate change has direct implications for child marriage rates. Natural disasters like floods and cyclones often lead to displacement and loss of livelihoods. In such contexts, families may resort to child marriage as a survival strategy, they are homeless, believing it will provide better security for their daughters (Rahman, 2016). Besides, the economic strain caused by climate change impacts, such as reduced agricultural productivity, compels families to see early marriage as a viable means to alleviate economic pressures. During 2020-2022, the rate of child marriage increased sharply during COVID-19 because at that time no face-to-face education, and people stayed home (Makino et al., 2021). Thus we can say that natural disaster plays a role in increasing child marriage.

### Influence of Migration and Urbanization

Migration and urbanization also play a role in child marriage trends. Families migrating to urban areas often face economic hardships and lack of social support, living in slum areas where social security for girls is very low (Rahman & Nasrin, 2016). Some migrants come alone to cities and their families live in villages where teenage girls are not fully secure leading to increased reliance on early marriage as a coping strategy. The rate of child marriage is very high among migrant families especially where the men migrate abroad and their families live in Bangladesh. They are extremely conscious about their daughters; and do not want to continue education of their daughters after secondary education (Rahman, 2021). At the same, migrant families, particularly those in informal settlements may resort to child marriage due to insecurity and lack of community support structures.

### Social Pressure and Moral Degradation

Pressure from the community and moral degradation can strongly influence the decision to marry off daughters early. In many rural communities, there is significant social pressure to conform to traditional practices, including child marriage. Families fear social ostracism if they do not marry their daughters early. Sometimes it is seen as social evil if their daughter's age is more than 25 years old (Kamal et al., 2015). Considering these issues, most rural families marry off their daughters early. When other families in the community marry off their daughters early, it creates a ripple effect, prompting others to follow suit to avoid social stigma. Currently, a large number of boys and girls are very curious about marriage. A report shows that 41% of teenagers in urban areas get married before 18 years old (Jahan, 2024).

### Uncontrolled internet access

Internet is available in Bangladesh. There is no restriction for younger. They can access to any website for instance pornography. At present teenagers are addicted to mobile phones and sometimes engage in illegal activities such as hijacking, drug trafficking and addiction, and Kishor (children) gang. In this emotional stage, they have no sense of reality. Besides girls, boys under 21 years old always see the blue picture on the internet and are addicted to sexual relations (Unicef, 2021). Some of them put pressure on their parents to marry off. As a result, their parents are bound to marry off them.

### Broken family

Broken family means divorce or separation of parents or second marriage of either one of the parents. This rate in Bangladesh is increasing rapidly. Children of broken families do not receive proper care, frequently facing ignorance and physical torture (Patoari, 2020). Family members keep themselves busy with new ones. Their children do not get proper guidelines. Such kinds of children spend their time with the same group who have an interest in deviant behavior. Among them, the number of child marriages is very high (Rahman, 2024).

From the above discussion, it can be stated that this bad practice is mostly practiced in the rural areas, especially in unprivileged areas, and sometimes in the urban areas where the facilities of girls are very limited. In this regard, the young girls have no choice to take decisions about their life and are bound to marry off. Besides, the social pressure within the communities is another factor of child marriage. At the same, some other indicators are responsible for example, location of schools, educational institutions, family tradition, men's family headed, unemployment, and unconsciousness.

## 5. Consequences of Child Marriage

Child marriage in Bangladesh has sharply decreased but last 6/7 years this rate has been increasing again. There are many factors behind these. It is high time to reduce this rate as soon as possible otherwise a disaster is waiting for Bangladesh. Almost one minor girl is getting married every 2 seconds in the world (Plan International, 2024). The recent alarming upswing in child marriage in Bangladesh has profound and multifaceted consequences, impacting individuals, families, and society as a whole. Child marriage frequently ends a girl's education forever. A lack of education limits girls' choices and opportunities throughout their lives, not just when they are children. Sometimes it increases risks of violence, maltreatment, marriage problems and divorce, the deprivation of the right to receive family care during adolescence, protection, and other civil rights, in addition to deepening discrimination against girls and women (BNWLA 2021). Child marriage directly makes girls far more vulnerable to the profound health risks of early pregnancy and childbirth (Ferdousi, 2013). This resurgence influenced by a range of socio-economic and cultural factors, has both immediate and long-term effects.

### Health Consequences

Child brides often face severe health complications. Early pregnancies can lead to higher rates of maternal and neonatal mortality, as their bodies are not fully developed for childbirth. There are also increased risks of complications such as obstetric fistula, premature birth, and low birth weight in infants. The mental health of child brides is adversely affected, with increased incidences of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder due to early marriage and subsequent abuse or neglect (Rahman et al., 2020). BBS (2024) reported that at the age of 15-19, about 24% of total women get pregnant. Also table 06 shows the outcome of adolescent pregnancy.

Table 6: Outcome of Adolescent Pregnancy (10-19 yrs.) (Percent)

Indicators	2023	2022
Live birth	88.79	87.05
Stillbirth	1.24	1.61
Pregnancy loss by Miscarriage	7.66	8.48
Pregnancy loss by Abortion	2.31	2.86

Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), 2024

### Educational Disruption

Child marriage significantly contributes to school dropout rates among girls. Once married, girls are often forced to leave school, limiting their educational attainment and future opportunities for economic independence. Lack of education perpetuates the cycle of poverty. Uneducated women have fewer job opportunities, making it difficult to break free from poverty and further increasing their vulnerability to child marriage.

### Economic Impact

Early marriage leads to economic dependency on husbands or families, limiting girls' ability to contribute to the economy. This dependency often restricts their ability to negotiate better living conditions or access to resources (Islam, 2021). The aggregate effect of widespread child marriage hinders economic growth by reducing the workforce's educational and skill levels, thereby limiting economic productivity and innovation.

### Social and Cultural Consequences

Child marriage reinforces gender inequality, as it often places girls in subservient roles with limited decision-making power within their households and communities. This perpetuates a culture where girls and women are valued less than boys and men. Children of child brides are more likely to face health, education, and economic disadvantages, perpetuating a cycle of inequality and poverty across generations.

### Legal and Human Rights Issues

Child marriage is a violation of human rights, denying children their right to education, health, and freedom from violence and exploitation. It often contravenes both national and international laws aimed at protecting children's rights. Despite legal frameworks prohibiting child marriage, enforcement remains weak due to socio-cultural acceptance and lack of awareness, making it difficult to protect vulnerable children effectively.

### Impact on Population Dynamics

Child marriage contributes to higher fertility rates, leading to overpopulation and increased pressure on already strained resources and services such as healthcare and education. An increasing number of young mothers can lead to a demographic imbalance, where a large segment of the population remains economically unproductive and dependent, posing challenges for national development.

### Impact on Community and Family Structures

Early marriages often result in unstable family structures, with higher rates of domestic violence and marital breakdowns, which can have negative effects on the social fabric of communities. Child brides frequently face social stigma and isolation, which can lead to reduced support networks and increased vulnerability to abuse and exploitation.

### **Broader Societal Implications**

The prevalence of child marriage undermines efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to gender equality, education, and health. Increased maternal and child health issues place a significant burden on public health systems, diverting resources from other critical health services and development initiatives.

From the above discussion, it can be said that child marriage is on the rise in Bangladesh, which is a complicated problem with wide-ranging effects on the country's economy, education system, health, and human rights. A multifaceted strategy is needed to address this issue, one that involves giving girls access to economic and educational opportunities, enhancing enforcement, bolstering legal frameworks, and increasing public awareness. Bangladesh cannot hope to safeguard its long-term growth and preserve the rights and futures of its children unless it addresses the underlying causes and lessens their effects (Islam & Razzaque, 2023).

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## **6. Remedy of Child Marriage**

Addressing the alarming upswing in child marriage in Bangladesh requires a multifaceted approach that tackles the underlying socio-economic and cultural drivers. Here are several strategies and interventions that can be employed to combat child marriage effectively:

### **Strengthening Legal Frameworks and Enforcement**

Strengthen and enforce existing laws prohibiting child marriage. The legal age of marriage should be consistently upheld at 18 for girls and boys without exceptions. Provide comprehensive training for law enforcement officials to ensure they understand and are committed to enforcing child marriage laws effectively. Establish community-based monitoring systems to report and prevent child marriages, involving local leaders, teachers, and healthcare workers.

### **Promoting Education and Empowerment**

Invest in education, particularly for girls, by providing scholarships, building more schools, and creating safe and supportive learning environments. Offer vocational training and skills development programs to empower girls with economic opportunities and alternatives to marriage. Implement life skills education in schools to empower girls and boys with knowledge about their rights, reproductive health, and the importance of delaying marriage (Rahman, 2024).

### **Economic Support and Incentives**

Expand social protection programs to support families financially, reducing the economic pressure to marry off daughters at a young age. Provide conditional cash transfers to families that keep their daughters in school and unmarried until they reach 18. Support microfinance and income-generating activities for women and families to reduce economic dependency on early marriage.

### **Raising Awareness and Changing Social Norms**

Launch nationwide awareness campaigns to educate communities about the legal implications, health risks, and negative impacts of child marriage (Islam & Rahman, 2014). Collaborate with religious and community leaders to advocate against child marriage and promote gender equality. Highlight successful stories of girls who have avoided child marriage and pursued education and careers to inspire change.

### **Enhancing Access to Health Services**

Provide comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education to adolescents, focusing on the importance of delaying pregnancy and marriage. Ensure that adolescents have access to youth-friendly health services, including family planning and counseling. Provide support services for married adolescents, including healthcare, education, and economic opportunities, to improve their quality of life and reduce vulnerability.

### **Engaging Men and Boys**

Educate boys and men about gender equality and the negative impacts of child marriage to promote supportive attitudes toward delaying marriage. Encourage fathers to support their daughters' education and discourage early marriage through community initiatives and programs.

### **Improving Data Collection and Research**

Develop robust systems for collecting and analyzing data on child marriage to inform policies and track progress. Research to understand the specific cultural, economic, and social factors driving child marriage in different regions of Bangladesh. Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of interventions to refine strategies and ensure that they are meeting their goals.

### **Strengthening Partnerships and Coordination**

Strengthen collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, and international organizations to coordinate efforts and share resources. Support grassroots organizations that work directly with communities to advocate for girls' rights and prevent child marriage. Engage in regional and international networks to share best practices and gain support for efforts to end child marriage.

### Addressing Cultural and Religious Factors

Design programs that are culturally sensitive and respect local traditions while promoting the message against child marriage. Work with religious leaders to reinterpret religious teachings in ways that support delaying marriage and promote the well-being of girls.

### Creating Safe Spaces for Girls

Establish safe spaces in communities where girls can receive education, support, and empowerment training. Provide protection services for girls at risk of child marriage, including shelters and legal assistance.

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## 7. Conclusion

Bangladesh has to address child marriage with a comprehensive and long-term strategy that includes health services, education, economic assistance, community involvement, and legislative reforms. To empower girls and their families to make educated decisions about their futures, we must address the underlying causes and cultural norms that support child marriage. Significant progress toward ending child marriage and guaranteeing a better future for Bangladeshi girls can be reached by cooperating at the local, national, and international levels (ICRW, 2013). It is high time to raise consciousness about the comprehensiveness of child marriage and its negative impacts. To lower the prevalence of child marriage, it is needed stronger enforcement of current laws, extensive public awareness efforts, and financial support for families (Zidane, 2022).

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