

Does Covid-19 trigger surge in Child marriage? A study in a village of Jashore district of Bangladesh

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyse how the lockdown affects child marriage or forced marriage. In rural areas girls living in remote areas and growing up below the poverty line are at the highest risk of forced child marriage. However, many studies show that in times of disaster or crisis, child marriage practices, which heavily affect girls are increasing. The study also aims at determining the immediate causes of forced marriage during Covid-19 as well as how the lock down period due to Covid-19 influence the decision of marriage. School closures and declining family incomes have direct relationship with child marriage which also put additional strain on families. This study will focus on whether people are forcing their daughters to marry off early because of this long lockdown and the immediate pictures of forced marriage of the girls in this pandemic situation in rural area. The qualitative descriptive research design was found to be the most suitable design for this study considering the short period of time. In this research, case study has been used to know real life experience of the respondents and in-depth interview method has been taken to know the guardian's opinion. This study then intends to examine the child marriage could be one of the options for the marginal people when they face adverse effects from any disasters or pandemic situation.

Keywords: Child Marriage, COVID-19, Forced marriage, Lockdown

Introduction

Covid-19, an invisible virus shut down the whole world and changed almost everything. It was patently unimaginable, but the reality is, it has happened to us and to the world. We talk about changes that we are experiencing right now, but one change which should equally be focused on and is being overlooked, is "child marriage", a truly global problem hitting countries across cultures, ethnicities, and even religions (Akter, 2020).

In this critical period of the country, the elites of the society are trying to adapt but the rural society is changing the image of child marriage. Parents of marginal family are using the pandemic as an opportunity to marry off their under-age daughters. Before Corona pandemic, Bangladesh has committed to eliminate

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child marriage by 2030 in line with target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals. But Corona pandemic is a factor which is becoming the barrier to fulfill the commitment (Desmond Tutu, 2020).

Background of the Study

The ongoing Covid-19 has thrown families, communities and economies all over the world in utter distress and hardship. However, we are yet to see the full impact of it on the poorest countries i.e. those with fragile health, inadequate social welfare, weak communications and governance systems.

Every year, about 12 million girls in the world get married before the age of 18. The charity World Vision estimates that 4 million girls could be victims of child marriage in the next two years because of Corona. In March 2021, the United Nations warned that an additional 13 million girls could be victims of child marriage in the next decade due to corona. However, past experience from the Ebola crisis and other acute emergency situations such as this strongly suggests that girls and women will be disproportionately affected, particularly amongst the poorest and socially marginalized groups. (Sharmin, 2020)

The child or forced marriage is more common in rural area due to the absence of a factor which is education. However, there are many other factor besides this, due to which this child or forced marriage takes place in the society. Another, thing that it has been found in this study is that the emergencies and disasters affect child marriage more. (Lilian, Nancy, Odundo, Akondo, & Ngaruiya, 2015)

The impact of COVID-19 has intensified older issues of racial and gender discrimination in society and in schools. The closure of schools and jobs in order to limit and subsequently stop the pandemic has meant exposing millions of girls and women to serious risks, especially in less economically advanced countries. In these areas of the world, the closure of schools has generated additional household and family chores for girls, requiring physical work and long- time allocated for it (Corlatean, 2020).

According to international experts, after the pandemic period ends, statistics will confirm a substantial increase in school dropout caused by forced marriages and early pregnancy in adolescence (Darso, 2020).

Plan International, a development and humanitarian organisation conducted a study in Kurigram and found out 40 child marriage took place on February, 29

on March, 19 on April, and 33 in May. A total of 73 separate incidents of child marriage occurred within two weeks of the span when a study was undertaken by the Gender Justice and Diversity Division of BRAC in 11 districts. Along with factors responsible for child marriage in typical circumstances, there are some specific reasons found by the study which are pushing the rate of child marriage too high during this pandemic (Akter, 2020).

UNICEF experts point out that prior to the pandemic the secondary level school constituted a major obstacle to early marriages. In the Central and West African region, 4 out of 10 girls are forced to marry before the age of 18. In different region, such as Mali, Niger or Burkina Faso, statistics show that 6 out of 10 girls are forced into marriage even before that age. Save the Children Africa experts also mention the same risks of sexual violence and early pregnancy for girls who no longer attend school. They make reference to previous experiences, when the Ebola crisis led to a mass school dropout among children, especially girls. The result was that 11,000 girls in Sierra Leone became pregnant, consequences which, according to the same experts, are likely in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic as well (Grant, 2020).

At a time when the Covid-19 pandemic has forced the world indoors, child marriages seem to have risen in the country. It turns out that child marriage has an upward relationship with pandemic situation. Researchers' research on this is still very insignificant. This study will provide an idea of how Covid-19 is creating impact on child marriage in Gopinathpur village. It will also show how much parents support child marriage because of Covid-19 pandemic and how child brides faced mental stress due to sudden marriage.

Literature Review

Erica Hall described that the number of child marriages increases during conflicts, disasters or epidemics," Hall also added that the risk of this child marriage is increasing as various agencies are not able to work in full force in this situation. Hall added that in order to reduce the number of children in the family, parents can decide to marry their daughter. "It's a survival strategy" (Kimani, 2020). Women and girls are more vulnerable group before disaster, during disaster and after disaster (Nasreen, 2017).

According to the study, 85 percent marriage took place due to guardian's concern for their daughter's future, school closure is responsible for 71 percent of child marriage, 62 percent occurred due to the preference of potential grooms who lost their job overseas and returned to their village, low income or inability of guardians to maintain family facilitated 61 percent of marriages (Akter, 2020).

Parents might marry their daughters out of fear of pre-marital pregnancy or relationships, which can bring shame on the family (Desmond Tutu, 2020).

Bangladesh topped the list of child marriages in the world. According to UNICEF, 59 percent of adolescents in the country get married before the age of 18. And 22 percent of marriages are 15 years old. The non-governmental organization 'Foundation for People' prepared a survey report by calling 56 thousand women and children. It said 482 child marriages were held in 53 districts in June this year (Khan,2020).

According to the Child Helpline 1098, the number of child marriage-related phone calls has more than doubled since then. Chowdhury Md. Mohaimen, Manager of Child Helpline reported that the rate of child marriage in Bangladesh has risen alarmingly due to corona infection. He said, „In April this year, the child helpline received 450 phone calls related to child marriage. But in March, this number was 322 (Khan, 2020).

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

For this reason, it is necessary to conduct a comprehensive study on forced marriage with a view to explaining the actual position of girls and guardians' perception.

Objectives of the Study

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

Research Methodology

Qualitative research method is used to find answer of our objectives. Qualitative method is used because the research explores the real-life experience of the victim of forced marriage and their guardian's perception. The study area is Gopinathpur village under Abyhaynagar upazila of Jashore District under Khulna Divi

sion of Bangladesh where we have found that child marriage is most common phenomena. Due to limited time and resources, the researcher has chosen this village.

Both primary and secondary data sources are used in this research to collect necessary data. Primary data are collected through case study method in which a semi-structured questionnaire is used. Ten cases have been selected purposively those who are the victim of child marriage in pandemic and to know their experience. To know the guardian's perception of married girl ten in-depth interviews have been conducted. Thematic analysis is used for the qualitative data analysis.

Data Analysis and Result Discussion

Affecting Factors of Early marriage during Covid-19:

Economic crisis as a factor of marriage

Economic crisis has resulted to the occurrence of child marriages, leading to captivity of girls who end up as wives against their will. Current pandemic situation increase economic pressure on families escalating early and forced marriages. Financial crisis combined with the traditional practice of marriage parents preferred to marry their girls. When a family is faced with high poverty level, young women are compelled to early marriage.

Most of the respondents explained that, economic crisis is the main factor of early marriage of their younger daughter. Due to the long lockdown, many poor people in rural areas have lost their jobs. Most of the poor people in the village are day laborers. And those in the middle class had their business shut down during this long lockdown. Having a young girl at home in this situation means an extra burden to them. Therefore, as soon as the marriage proposal came, they want their girl to be married soon.

One of the guardians of the respondent Rosul Mia told that, "my all sources of income has stopped from the starting period of lockdown, I have three daughters & one son. It is very difficult for me to maintain my family. Then my elder brother selected a groom/boy for my daughter & I agreed to his proposal. At least one member of my family has decreased."

One of the respondent named Sathi Akter said, "Sathi has recently got married in this lockdown period. Due to the financial problems of the father, the marriage was postponed. Her father is a cattle trader. They are four siblings. Her elder sister also got married at an early age. Now her older sister is the mother of

one child. She has two younger brothers. She had no consent to marriage. She desires to study more.”

Closure of school

Due to the current pandemic situation all school are closed for a long time. This act as a major driving force of the child marriage. In the study area, most of the respondents reported that, because of the current pandemic situation, they forced their daughters into marriage. Because they think the school is closed because of the long lockdown in this Covid-19 and when the girls are a little older, it is difficult to get marry her later. So they think it is better to get married before hand.

One of the respondent named Rukaiya Khatun told that, “Due to closure of the educational institution for about 6 months my parents were so much worried about my marriage. They think I'm getting older. All my cousins are married. But I had no consent to the marriage. I want to continue my study.”

In rural areas with the traditional practice of preference for boys influences parents to take sons to school rather than daughters in circumstances of economic constraints. When a community is faced with high poverty level, young women's education is compromised, leading to early pregnancy and forced marriage.

One of the guardians of the respondent Abul Ali told that, “As much as my daughter has studied, she will be able to teach her child. In fact, the school has been closed for so long due to this corona. What is the benefit of just sitting at home? It is better to get married”

He also said that, “My daughter used to get stipend from the school. But now the school is closed and she doesn't get any stipend. Besides, I am a farmer. My income is very low and expenses are very high. That's way I married my daughter.”

Due to the school closure girls are staying at home and they are doing the household chores. So, the longer girls stay at home, the more they will be at risk of child marriage.

Social stigma and insecurity

Women and girls assume lower societal status in village area emanating from cultural and traditional beliefs. During this pandemic such traditional beliefs and stigma act as a trigger force in child marriage. Such beliefs suppress girls capability to express their freedom and consent to the marriage.

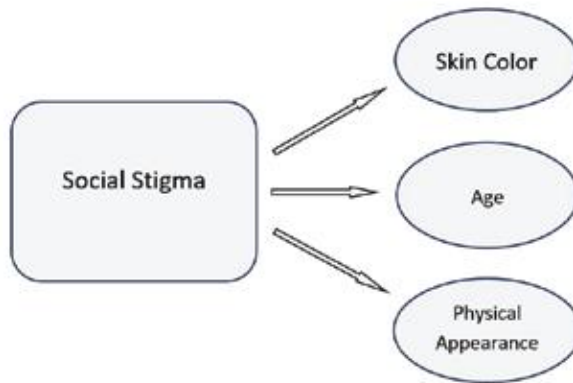


Figure: Different types of social stigma.

Surprisingly it is showed that, complexion is a trigger surge of forced marriage. In the rural area, most of the parents are tensed about marriage of the skin color of their young girls. That is why parents are anxious to marry girls as soon as possible.

One respondent named Rahima said that, “I was studying in class ten. The financial situation of my family is not good. My parents were worried about my marriage because of the black color of my skin. For this reason they wanted to marry me early. In this lockdown period they thought of getting myself married because neighbors & relatives would get little chance to influence the marriage as my skin color is not perfect.”

Elders (male community leaders) and relatives in the rural area believes that aging is a major factor which creates the insecurity to marriage of girls. In the study area, most of the respondents reported that, because of the pandemic situation, they forced their daughters into marriage. Because they think the school is closed because of the long lockdown in this COVID-19 and when the girls are a little older, it is difficult to get marry her later. So they think it is better to get married beforehand. The girl means a kind of extra stress to them so they think that they will get rid of that stress as soon as they get married.

One of the respondent’s guardians named Hasan Ali said that, “my daughter is getting old. My daughter is already 17 years old, if we don't marry her early, it will be a problem to get her married later. However, this lockdown is the right time to get married.”

One of the respondents named Jakiya said that, “I was not willing to get

married so soon. I wanted to study. But my parents forced me to get married. They said, after getting older, it will be difficult to get married later."

Physical appearance is the most attractive issue to marriage considered in rural area. In this pandemic situation the appearance of girls is having an impact on early marriages. Due to the color of the skin and fatness, the parents are also worried about marrying their daughter in this time.

One guardian named Abul Sheikh told that that, "My daughter is dark, short in stature, and a little fickle in nature. It may be difficult to marry her later. And the school is closed, what the girl will do."

Another respondent Sazida Sajid told that, "The boys refused me because I didn't look good. Finally now the groom's/boy's family agreed to marry me only for the money. As my husband's income has lessened to the pandemic and he accepted the marriage for getting money."

Social Insecurity is another reason of early marriage or forced marriage during this lockdown period. There is no guarantee when the school will open and when the children will study. That is why parents are frustrated with the marriage of their daughters and are marrying them soon.

One the respondent's guardian named Basir reported that, "my elder brother advised me to marry my daughter and I think wasting more money to girl's education is unnecessary and now the school is also closed".

Low cost of the marriage

Most of the parents have reported that they have given their younger daughter marry at low cost during the pandemic period. They are marrying the girl at low cost or without arrangement of marriage ceremony.

One guardian said that, "I am a little shopkeeper. I have some agricultural land where I do farming in my leisure time. I have four sons and daughters. The family was almost paralyzed as my agricultural production also stopped during the lockdown. At the moment I get a good offer for my daughter. And at this time the cost for marriage is less. No ceremony was held. That's why I married the girl."

Right time to marriage

In this pandemic period, lockdown is the right time to marriage.

A guardian named Hossain Ali describes that, "Nothing is stuck for Corona. Then why is the marriage stuck? This time I got a good groom/boy for my

daughter. So I quickly married the girl to the groom/boy. Because this is the right time to get married. Now the cost is less to get married."

Religious and traditional belief

From time immemorial, we have seen how religious prejudices affect our lives. During this epidemic, religious prejudice is affecting child marriage on a large scale.

One guardian reported that, "God will be angry if the girls walk around naked. School closed for a long time. It is not right to keep a young girl at home. The more young girls there are in the house, the more sin there will be."

Jakiya said that, "Before marriage, all the sins of the girls fell on the parents, so they married me early."

Job displacement

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

Karima said that, "My father worked in a private company. Due to the situation he lost his job and returned to the village home. My mother lives in the village house with 4 children. When the wheel of the family began to fall off, he married me to 40-year-old man who had returned from abroad. I was forced to agree to the marriage as my father had no income."

One of the guardians named Rahim said that, "I am an expatriate Bengali. I came to the country before the lockdown. I could not return to work due to lockdown. All my savings was spent. In this situation, there is no way to run the family and without finding any way, I married my daughter."

Low demand of bride and overseas bride

Social pressures and traditions, including the widespread practice of paying dowry, and lower dowries for younger girls, make child marriage not only accepted, but expected in some communities. During this pandemic it is also act as a major factor.

In this pandemic situation, dowry is an affecting factor of child or forced marriage. One of the guardian said that, "I find a groom/boy for my daughter who is living in Saudi Arab and he had lots of money."

Another respondent reported, "My father agreed to marry me because the groom's/boy's family had less demand to my family."

Fearing the loss of honor

Fearing the loss of honor is another cause of child marriage.

One of the guardians said that, "As I have three daughters I am worried of the girl. Because my husband died. I am in a great tension with my daughter. I married the girl before the honor was lost."

Others factors

There are other factors of child marriage in this pandemic situation. Such as, relationship with other boys, loss of virginity of their daughter, harsh comment of relatives & neighbors.

One of the respondents named Sathi reported that, "My parents were worried because I was having relationship with other boy in my village. Hearing that they forced me to marry."

Weak legislature reinforcement

From the study area we found that due to this pandemic situation law enforcement agencies were not very active. So the guardians and other people take this as an opportunity. Even the neighbors don't talk about this child marriage issue. However, the surveillance of the law enforcement agencies is getting less now.

Psychological Stress Due to Sudden Marriage:

Depression

Due to child or forced marriage, Child brides is becoming mentally tensed and stressed. One of the respondents Rogina Khatun told that, "Although I gave my consent to the marriage. But on the day of the wedding I was very upset because I couldn't find anyone to share my grief with. Even I do not know my in law's family. I had many dreams to grow up by studying."

She also added that, "I myself was going into depression as the educational institution was closed for about 5 months. My family thinks as I'm getting older but I'm not getting married. All my cousins are married. I have to face such harsh words."

Anxiety

Due to the sudden marriage decision young girls dreams have shattered. Anxiety is another psychological factor they are facing now.

Khaleda said that, "A few days ago I used to go to school in a white school dress. Sudden of my marriage fell me in anxiety because I read in the book how harmful a child marriage can be for a girl. But my family don't care about my words."

Emotional blackmail

Parents and relatives tried to do emotional blackmailing by saying different types words like family's hardship, good proposal etc. to the young girl which mental stress.

Sathi told that, "My family members used to misbehave with me and forced me to marriage." Violence and abuse

Covid- 19 has different effects on the lives of men and women, boys and girls. Domestic violence has increased during Covid-19. Girls Children are at risk of sexual abuse, trafficking, child labour etc. However, violence and abuse are major psychological stress after the marriage.

One of the respondents said that, "I had no consent to the marriage. I gave my consent for the pressure of family. After marriage, my husband and my husband's family do not treat me well. I am even tortured in various ways. However, I am taking the highest care of my husband's family just to get their love."

Physical and Psychological problems arose from sexual relation:

Due to forced sexual relationship, girls and women faced several problems and they also mentally depressed.

Khadija said that, "I feel very helpless when my husband forced me to sex with me against my will".

Household responsibilities

After the marriage young girls are not well prepared to handle household management burdens and responsibilities. This also creates mental stress.

Rogina said that, "getting married at an early age, I have to suffer a lot of hardships. I have to carry water in a small clay-pot in the mornings. I have to sweep and swap the floor every day. I used to feel very hungry, but I have to be satisfied with the amount of food that I was provided. I never get to eat enough".

Most common causes of child marriage includes poverty, lack of social security for adolescents, natural disasters and limited law enforcement. Besides

social attitude towards women act as a barrier. Rural patriarchal society still thinks that girls and women will take care of family members and give birth to children. That is their main responsibility. Their participation in education and economic activities is considered as secondary.

The rate of child marriage has increased in remote areas and char areas in the north and in the coastal and remote villages of the country. (ParsToday, 26 September, 2020)

In the study area the poor family, whose income has been reduced owing to pandemic situation, is trying to reduce the cost of eating at home by marrying teenage girls without any arrangement secretly. In times of crisis, families see child marriage as a way to cope with greater economic hardship and try to reduce the number of family members.

Parents might marry their daughters out of fear of social stigma or pre-marital relationships, which can bring shame on the family. (Girls Not Brides, 2020)

In the study area social stigma is the major cause behind child marriage in this pandemic.

School closure is the major reason for child marriage. As the school is closed the poor family wants to get rid of the trouble by marrying the girl to protect the growing girl from safety and harassment from the scoundrels in their community. Low cost of marriage is another factor.

School closures and declining family incomes have put additional strain on families. Girls are spending more time on household chores due to being at home. Many adolescent girls may not be able to go back to school because of this forced child marriage.

Besides, the number of child marriages has increased during this time of pandemic outbreak. Due to the surveillance of the law enforcement agencies is getting weak.

Conclusion

Corona infection is changing lives. The terrible virus is affecting the socio-economic situation. In this atmosphere, there is a rush even in child marriage, the statistics say at least that. The marginal people become the victims of this situation; hence organize forced marriages of their little daughters. So, government

should take measures to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on the prevalence of child marriages within its border, consolidated efforts from various actors need to be maximized to successfully respond to this harmful practice against women and girls. However, the existing law agencies are not being implemented properly. Strict law enforcement as well as proper birth registration and marriage registration must be ensured. The government should give priority to reopening schools safely. Because the longer the girls stay at home, the more they will be at risk of child marriage. Social analyst, policy maker, social worker and different organizations should take necessary steps to address this challenge to end child marriage.

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