Int J Soc Welfare 2004: **13**: 244–253

INTERNATIONAL
JOURNAL OF
SOCIAL WELFARE
ISSN 1369-6866

The socio-cultural context of child marriage in a Bangladeshi village

Chowdhury FD. The socio-cultural context of child marriage in a Bangladeshi village
Int J Soc Welfare 2004: 13: 244–253 © Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

This article focuses on the reasons for child marriage in a Bangladeshi village. Although the mean age of marriage for women in Bangladesh is currently 20.2, nearly half of all girls are married before the age of 18. In Bangladesh, female sexuality is controlled through early marriage and the custom of *purdah,* which limits the social interactions between men and women. The methodology of this research was participant observation, supplemented by questionnaires, discussions, interviews and the construction of case studies. The study was conducted in a village in Bangladesh, and looked at why the rural people of Bangladesh marry off their daughters at an early age, whether they think that they will profit from it, and how. Cost-benefit analysis in exchange theory provides the theoretical framework. This study finds that child marriage occurs as a result of the profit-making motive of the people of Bangladesh, despite the huge costs to the individuals involved, the local community and society as a whole.

Farah Deeba Chowdhury

Department of Political Science, Rajshahi University, Bangladesh

Key words: child marriage, child bride, cost-benefit analysis, social values, poverty, local beliefs, menarche, dowry, sexual purity, shame, security

Farah Deeba Chowdhury, Department of Political Science
Rajshahi University, Rajshahi 6205, Bangladesh
E-mail: farahdeebachowdhury@yahoo.com

Accepted for publication September 17, 2003

Introduction

The women of Bangladesh are among the most oppressed in the world. Bangladeshi women, both rural and urban, traditional and modern, live in a social system that condones their being accorded an inferior status (Jahan, 1975). After birth, girls are viewed as a burden to the parental household, whereas boys are regarded as an asset (White, 1992). Sons are expected to support their parents in old age in the absence of a social security system provided by the state, and they are supposed to take responsibility for their parental families (Chowdhury, 1997). In Bangladesh, women play different social roles at different stages of life – daughter, bride, mother, wife, widow. Generally, women are not called by their given names. They are referred to as so-and-so's daughter, mother, wife or widow. Generally, women receive their rights, respect and status from their male relations (Chen, 1993). Non-accessibility to the resource base keeps women away from income generation and maintains their subordinate position (Khan, 1993). According to prevailing inheritance legislation, women's share is half that of men (Sobhan, 1978). This inheritance law was introduced as being in accordance with Islamic principles. In Islam women have no financial obligation to support anyone, and they have the right to independent control over their personal assets. But in most cases women are deprived of their legal share.

Women's participation in Bangladeshi politics is peripheral despite there being women leaders in the government and the opposition (Chowdhury, 1995). The Secretariat is the nerve centre of administration in Bangladesh, but only two of the Secretaries are women (Morshed, 1999). Teaching is considered a prestigious job for women. However, in 1999 there were only 680 women compared with 3,654 men teaching at the ten major universities in Bangladesh (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 1999).

Marriage is a legal union between a man and a woman for performing social roles as husband and wife, and it is universal in Bangladesh (Naher, 1985). All offspring from a marital relationship are socially and legally regarded as legitimate children (Dyer, 1983). It is believed that a woman must be married at least once in her lifetime (Kotalova, 1996). A study reveals that both parents and their unmarried mature daughters have a sense of guilt if the daughter remains unmarried. Parents consider them as burdens and as 'the spine of a fish stuck in the throat' [*galay atkano kata*] (Aziz & Maloney, 1985).

Why do rural people of Bangladesh marry off their daughters at an early age? Do they think that they will profit from it? In which case, how do they profit? This article addresses these questions with the aim of unfolding the reasons for child marriage, and its grave consequences for society. The study was conducted in Chamrabo, a small village in Bangladesh. Cost-benefit

analysis in exchange theory has provided the theoretical framework for the study. The article is organised into the following sections: definition of child marriage and its consequences; methodology; theoretical framework; profile of the Chamrabo village; child marriage: why does it occur?; child marriage in the light of exchange theory: a discussion; and conclusion.

Definition of child marriage and its consequences

The minimum legal age for marriage in Bangladesh is 18 for women and 21 for men. Child marriage occurs when a boy or girl is given in marriage before this age. To conduct and execute child marriage is a punitive crime, carrying a punishment of up to one month's imprisonment or a 1,000 taka fine or both (Bhuiya, 1986). Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that by child is meant every human being below the age of 18 years. So according to this Article, a girl below 18 years is considered a child (Hossain, 1990). Although the mean age of marriage for women in Bangladesh has risen to 20.2 (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 1999), nearly half of all girls are married before the age of 18, which is a cause of early and frequent pregnancies (Planning Commission, 1998). The young mothers are not fully matured physically and emotionally and are at risk of difficult deliveries. A UNICEF report says:

> In many parts of South Asia, due to the poor quality of emergency obstetric care and high levels of malnutrition among young women, particularly anaemia and stunting, early marriage presents considerably increased risks to life itself. Teenage mothers have a 2–5 times greater risk of maternal death than women aged 20–25 years (UNICEF, 2001: 7).

Another study reveals that marriage between an underaged girl and a mature man causes sexual disharmony and other maladjustments. Sixty-five per cent of all first-marriage divorces occurred when the age of the bride was 8–13 years; among these, some 25 per cent had not begun to menstruate at the time of their marriage (Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service, 1990). Child marriage is a violation of human rights. It has physical, intellectual, psychological and emotional implications for the young brides. It denies young girls their childhood and adolescence. Child marriage also curtails their continued education. In Bangladesh the literacy rate of women is only 38.1 per cent, much lower than the 55.6 per cent literacy rate of men (Planning Commission, 1998). In primary schools 47.31 per cent of the pupils are girls and in secondary school 45.17 per cent. In the state colleges only 33.81 per cent of the students are women, and at university level 23.85 per cent (see Table 1). These statistics show that gender disparity prevails at all levels of formal education and the scenario is even more bleak and frustrating at the higher levels of education.

Table 1. Percentage of female students at different levels of education in Bangladesh.

Level	Percentage
Primary	47.31
Secondary	45.17
College	33.81
University	23.85

Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 1999.

Child marriage is the primary reason that Bangladeshi girls lag behind in education. It also undermines women's basic freedoms and control over their own lives. In consideration of these grave consequences, the government of Bangladesh adopted the slogan 'Stop Child Marriage, Build a Sound Nation' for The Child Rights Week 2001 (*The Daily Star*, 16 March 2002).

Methodology

The research methodology used in this study was participant observation, supplemented by questionnaires, discussions, interviews and the construction of case studies. The research was conducted in the village of Chamrabo in the Narshingdi District, located 30 miles from Dhaka (the capital city of Bangladesh). The duration of the study was from March 1995 to August 1995. A woman from a neighbouring village was hired to assist in the fieldwork. She was familiar with the village because her son-in-law's house was located there. Two NGOs, Grameen Bank and Integrated Family Development Program, have been operating in the village, the former since 1983 and the latter since 1992. In the first phase of the fieldwork, I conducted a socio-economic survey of the village. The purpose of the survey was twofold: to collect basic information about the villagers, e.g. their names, ages, educational qualifications, marital status, age at marriage, landholdings and occupations; and to get to know them. Gradually, I was able to establish good rapport with the villagers. Many male and female villagers were interested in talking with me, mainly because they thought that I had come to the village to offer them employment. Some thought that I was a family-planning worker and they asked me for advice on family planning. When I explained the purpose of my research, some of the villagers became frustrated, but many were happy to tell me about their lives. I carried a notebook around with me, noting down everything I regarded to be of importance for the study. Each night I made a note of all the events of daily life that had occurred that day.

The second phase of the fieldwork was devoted primarily to interviewing at least one male and one female member of each household in the village. At

this stage two male university students assisted me in interviewing the male respondents. I then conducted in-depth interviews with 50 per cent of the interviewees to construct case studies. In addition, I also conducted in-depth interviews with a number of government officials, NGO workers, the chairman and female members of the Union Parisad (Council), schoolteachers and the Imam (who leads the prayer in the mosque). I have used pseudonyms for all people named in this study.

Theoretical framework

The fundamental assumption of all exchange theories is that people always seek to make some profit in their exchange transactions with others and that the transactions are governed by considerations of costs and benefits – material and non-material. The first explicit formulation of exchange theory was the work of Sir James George Frazer (Frazer, 1919). In the second volume of *Folklore in the Old Testament,* Frazer conducted a study of various kinship and marriage practices among primitive societies and found a strong preference among Australian aboriginal people for cross-cousin marriage and the prohibition of parallel-cousin marriages. Frazer explained this custom in terms of the familiar utilitarian economic school of thought. Malinowski was the first to make a clear distinction between economic exchange and social exchange. He recognised the importance of basic psychological needs in explaining social behaviour, but rejected the economic motives in the social explanation model (Malinowski, 1922). Reacting to Malinowski's psychological interpretation, Marcel Mauss, in his book *Essai sur le don,* recognised that no single transaction could be isolated from society as a whole. Mauss de-emphasised the role of individuals in social exchange transactions. The triple obligation of social exchange – to give, to receive and to repay – are to be understood, not in the idiom of self-interest, but in terms of inter-personal, hence inter-group, relations (Mauss, 1925). Levi-Strauss rejected both Frazer's utilitarian interpretation and Malinowski's psychological conceptualisation; his explanation was similar to Mauss' analysis. Reacting sharply to the utilitarian assumption that social behaviour is motivated by calculated economic considerations, Levi-Strauss declared that it is the exchange that counts and not the things exchanged. For him, the items of exchange are culturally defined, and they are noteworthy not so much for their economic intrinsic value as for their symbolic extrinsic value. Levi-Straussian exchange is defined as a regulated form of behaviour in the context of societal rules and norms (Levi-Strauss, 1969).

George Homans is regarded by many as the most outstanding spokesman for the current individualistic exchange theory. The fundamental assumption of his exchange theory is that the principles for describing animal behaviour will form the core of a deductive system of propositions that explain social behaviour. Homans contended that individuals act only if they receive rewards, but that some care must be exercised by those involved in the interaction because rewards can lose their value. As the exchange proceeds, the participants will engage in two kinds of calculation. They will first calculate what it costs them in material and psychic terms to provide rewards to others. They will then also calculate the profit they amass from the rewards received. Generally they will be looking for a rough balance between these (Homans, 1961).

Blau points out that an individual enters into a social-exchange relation with the primary purpose of profiting from it. He assumes that in the exchange people will try to maximise the rewards and minimise the costs, but that imbalances will surely arise. Some exchange deals will not reward both parties equally. To the one who is less fortunate, a cost is incurred to produce the other's pleasure, and this cost might not be recouped. This constitutes an imbalance. Blau suggests that the usual nature of social exchange is imbalance. The weaker party gives up some of its will to the stronger and becomes subordinate. Subordina-tion in unbalanced exchanges is a kind of credit to the superior partner. It credits him in the sense that his position becomes well known in settings where exchanges occur in public (Blau, 1964). In this article I will use the cost-benefit analysis of the exchange theory.

Profile of the Chamrabo village

The village of Chamrabo in the Narshingdi District is located 30 miles from Dhaka (the capital city of Bangladesh). The village has 48 households and because there is no school the children attend school in the neighbouring village. Of the 48 households, 30 own only the house in which they live, while the remaining 18 households own some cultivable land along with their dwelling. The size of the land holdings is very small. Of the 48 households, 46 are Muslim and two are Hindu. The total population at the time of the study was 261 people, 130 men and 131 women. Fifteen of the men and 25 of the women were illiterate. Most of the villagers, both male and female, have had at least minimum schooling. Sixty-two men and 70 women completed primary education (Grades I–V); and 24 men and 18 women secondary education (Grades VI–X). Five men had a Secondary School Certificate (SSC), four a Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) and one a college degree. Only one woman had an SSC and none had an HSC or a college degree (see Table 2).

Table 2. Education level of men and women in the village of Chamrabo in Bangladesh.

	Male n (%)	Female n (%)	Total n (%)
Illiterate*	15 (5.75)	25 (9.58)	40 (15.33)
I–V	62 (23.75)	70 (26.82)	132 (50.57)
VI–X	24 (9.20)	18 (6.90)	42 (16.09)
SSC**	5 (1.92)	1 (0.38)	6 (2.30)
HSC***	4 (1.53)	0 (0)	4 (1.53)
Graduation	1 (0.38)	0 (0)	1 (0.38)
Not included****	19 (7.28)	17 (6.51)	36 (13.79)
Total	130 (49.81)	131 (50.19)	261 (100)

Notes: * By illiterate is meant those men and women who have no schooling and have passed the age limit for formal education.
** SSC Secondary School Certificate.
*** HSC Higher Secondary Certificate.
**** Not included means children under six years of age.

It was further observed that 32 of the 130 male villagers were students and 65 were employed in various professions. Some were in service or in business, but most were farm workers or factory workers and a few were rickshaw drivers. Fourteen of the men were unemployed, eight because of old age. Of the 131 female villagers, 30 were students and 9 were employed. Among these nine, two were factory workers, five were maidservants and two were vegetable sellers. Ten women were unemployed. They discontinued their education after completing the primary level, but remained without an occupation while waiting for marriage. Sixty-five of the villagers were housewives (see Table 3). Of the total female population, just under 50 per cent were housewives. The data reveals that women spent most of their time in unpaid family work. A study by Khan (1993) indicates that:

> . . . 85 per cent of the hours worked by men were for earning wages, where as of the total work time of women, 81 percent was allocated to home production with only 19 percent in income earning work. On the other hand, it is, therefore, apparent that except for those who are land-less, women generally have no time left for wage earning activities outside the home (Khan, 1993: 3).

Table 3. Occupation of the villagers of Chamrabo.

Occupation	Men	% of total population	Women	% of total population
Student	32	12.26	30	11.49
Employed	65	24.90	9	3.45
Unemployed	14	5.36	10	3.83
Housewife	0	0	65	24.90
Not included*	19	7.28	17	6.51
Total	130	49.81	131	50.19

Note: * Not included means children under six years of age.

Of the 130 male villagers, 67 were married and 63 unmarried. Of the 131 female villagers, 71 were married and 60 were unmarried. Of the 71 married female villagers, 50 were under eighteen at the time of their marriage and 21 were aged eighteen or older. In contrast, of the 67 married men only 4 were under twenty-one at the time of their marriage and 63 were twenty-one or older.

Child marriage: why does it occur?

Social values

There is a proverb in the villages of Bangladesh that girls are brought up by their parents, but they are handed over to other families and it is very hard for them to make other families their own. In Bangladeshi society girls are transferred to other families through marriage. Marriage is an obligation for women – this social value is one of the prime reasons for child marriage. It is unthinkable for women to remain unmarried. Kotalova writes:

> Even girls with grave physical defects are to be married at least once. They are given to widowers as second wives or to extremely poor men (even reputed wife abusers) and it is anticipated that their marriages will not last long (Kotalova, 1996: 192).

This social value originated from local beliefs of the villagers. To marry off the girls is regarded as a divine command and if girls are not given in marriage it is believed that they will succumb to immorality, which is a violation of their chastity. Furthermore, although the marriage of the men is also regarded as compulsory and necessary, unmarried men are not faced with the many questions and comments that unmarried women have to face. Society does not accord single women any status. Bachelorhood among men is not questioned, however, because male chastity is not important to society. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that 87 per cent of the population in Bangladesh is Muslim (Hours, 1995), and in Islam male chastity is as important as female chastity.

Another belief in some Bangladeshi villages is that seven is a suitable age for girls to marry and that girls of nine are already old and thus may be virtually unmarriageable. Naturally, parents prefer to marry off their daughters before the girls are regarded as old. Parents are always apprehensive that finding a good bridegroom will not be easy. In Bangladeshi society economically solvent boys or men are regarded as good bridegrooms. Furthermore, young girls are thought to have greater sexual and procreative power than older girls, and to be less at risk of miscarriage. Thus the bridegroom party will look for a young bride because the objectives of marriage are to procreate and build a family, to fulfil the sexual needs of both the man and the woman,

to determine the inheritor and to make life fixed and regular (Begum, 1993). Karimon, a village woman, relates:

> *I was married to Sajed Mian when I was 13 years old. He was economically solvent and a labourer by profession. So my parents regarded him as an eligible bridegroom. My parents believed that to marry off their girls was a divine command. When Sajed Mian proposed, my parents thought that it was not right to reject this eligible bridegroom, because such a suitable bridegroom might not turn up in the future.*[1]

Poverty

Poverty is one of the main reasons for child marriage. Although the rate of poverty in Bangladesh has decreased in recent years, 55 per cent of the population are still living below the poverty line and 27 per cent are living in extreme poverty (Hamid, 1996). The widespread discriminatory attitude towards girls, beginning immediately after birth, is even more prominent among poor families. After birth, girls are viewed as a burden to the parental household, whereas boys are regarded as an asset (White, 1992). In Bangladesh girls usually do not earn their own living, and if they do earn money, they are not supposed to contribute to the financial support of their natal family after marriage. But in Islam women are allowed to earn money if they observe *purdah* (wearing the veil) and can contribute to the financial support of their natal families. Even female university teachers in Bangladesh believe that they are not allowed to help their parental family financially. The situation for men is just the opposite. Men are criticised if they do not use part of their income to look after their parents. The common opinion of both men and women in the village is that God is displeased if boys do not look after their parents. In addition, villagers believe that parents have no more responsibilities towards their daughters after they are married off. Amina, a village woman relates:

> *Parents are happy to marry off their daughters even if girls are beaten or killed by their husbands, because the responsibilities are transferred from the parents to the husbands. I was married off at an early age because of poverty. I had five brothers and three sisters. Two more brothers and sisters had died earlier. I lost my mother when I was 10. My father was a farmer. My brothers and sisters could not get an education because of poverty. They lived from hand to mouth. After the death of my mother, all my brothers got married. Their wives considered my sisters and me as burdens in the poverty-stricken family. So I was married off. This relieved my father's headache, because the main religious responsibility of parents is to marry off their girls. I was married before menarche* [the onset of menstruation]. *My father-in-law was ill and wished to see his son's wife before death. So my in-laws arranged this marriage.*

Taslima was also given in marriage at the age of 13 in 1991 as a result of poverty. She explains the cause of her child marriage:

> *We were very poor. I had got some education in school. I had seven sisters. After the birth of my three sisters we got a brother. But after a few days he died. My mother got pregnant often, hoping for a son. According to social values boys look after their parents in old age and only sons, not the daughters, preserve the lineage. My father did not provide for more education for us, because we were to move to our husbands' families. He perceived that his only responsibility was to marry us off. After reaching menarche girls are used to hearing that they are now mature and that they will leave home to have sex with boys. It is a great dishonour for the parents if such an incident occurs. This insecurity is much more visible in poverty-stricken families. We were always advised not to mix with boys and not to get involved in romantic relationships. It would be disgraceful if other people knew about such a relationship with boys, and it would be difficult to marry off such girls. A good reputation is important for poor girls, because they cannot compensate for the scandal with money. Because of this social condition, my father wanted to marry me off at an early age. My husband had a business and he was 22 when he got married. He was the first-born son in his family. So it was with pleasure that his family took me in their home as a daughter-in-law. My father-in-law thought that I was beautiful and tall and looked mature. So my early age was not important to them.*

Local beliefs

There is a range of local beliefs in Bangladesh that contribute to the practice of child marriage. The villagers are frightened of sorcery, which implies performing magic using evil spirits. Rahima relates:

> *I was being persecuted by some hoodlums in the village. They used sorcery to stop my marriage. We went to* Kabiraj *who could give relief from sorcery and finally we were successful and I was married off at the age of 14 years*.

Salma talks about her apprehension regarding sorcery:

> *I do not want to marry off my daughter at an early age. I want to give her an education. But I may have to marry her off young for fear that somebody might use sorcery to prevent my daughter's marriage.*

[1] All excerpts (in italics) from the interviews with the villagers of Chamrabo are my own translation.

Villagers go to *pir-fakir* (saints) and *jin-sadhak* (devotees of a supernatural being) to fulfil their goals by either sorcery or spiritual means. Only honest goals can be achieved by spiritual means. Some of the villagers' goals are to bring husbands under control, give birth to a male child, resist the obstinacy of sons and daughters or obtain money. On the other hand, some villagers apply sorcery to do harm to others with whom there is enmity. The villagers also believe that it is possible to kill a person by means of sorcery. The villagers go to *pir-fakir* and *jin-sadhak* for simple and silly matters. One woman relates:

> *My one-year old granddaughter was living in Dhaka. One day I wanted to see her. So I went to the* jin-sadhak *and asked him to bring my granddaughter to me and the* jin-sadhak *agreed to bring her. But his wife made me understand that my granddaughter would be injured by tree branches when she was brought to me. After hearing this I asked the* jin-sadhak *not to bring my granddaughter.*

If a boy or his family proposes marriage to a girl but the girl or girl's family does not accept the proposal, then the boy or his family may apply sorcery to make the girl infatuated with the boy or to stop the girl's marriage to anyone else. The boy's party informs the girl's party that sorcery has been used. The boy's party might say, 'We used such and such a sorcery so that your girl will get old without being married off', or 'You did not give me your daughter, but we used sorcery so that your daughter will leave your house because she will become crazy for this boy'. Consequently, villagers arrange for the marriage of their daughters at an early age to avoid the risk that undesirable bridegrooms will apply sorcery to achieve their marriage aims.

Some of the villagers adhere to the belief that fourteen generations will be devastated if the girls are not married before they start to menstruate. The Imam who leads the prayer in the mosque told me, 'Islam directed that girls should be married off at an early age to protect them from the evil eyes of the boys'.

Desire

Child marriage also occurs to satisfy the wishes of the family members. In Bangladeshi culture, marriage is an inseparable part of life, and immediately after the birth of the children every parent starts to dream about their marriage. This desire is much more visible in the case of an elder son or daughter of the family. Fatema relates:

> *I was married off in 1989 at the age of 13, before menarche. I was the eldest child in my parents' family. So I was married off to satisfy the wishes of all my relatives. At that time I was in the sixth grade and my intended husband was a labourer in a Jute mill. My parents thought that this eligible bridegroom might not be available in the future.*

In addition, some parents arrange for a bride for their son in order to acquire a daughter. But the desire to have a daughter only occurs when parents have many sons but no daughter. A manager of the Grameen Bank relates, 'We had no sister. So I was married off when I was studying for my B.A. Honours class. My wife was a student in the sixth grade. My parents got a daughter through my marriage'.

To control a woman's personality

Women are always controlled in patriarchal societies. From childhood Bangladeshi girls are taught that women should always be under men's control, and this is one of the main reasons for child marriage. Thus women are deprived of education and of becoming self-reliant. Through education and self-reliance women become aware of their rights. They can begin to protest against exploitation and oppression. Education, economic solvency and age help to develop a woman's personality. Patriarchal society always considers a woman's personality as a challenge. Girls are married off at an early age to stop the development of their personality. Forkan married Hasina when she was 14. Forkan thought that Hasina would be submissive because she was so young. Not only bridegrooms, but also their families, prefer very young brides. Rahima's sister-in-law brought Rahima as a bride for her brother when she was 11. It is believed that girls of a young age are obedient and devoted to the members of the in-laws' family.

Dowry

In rural Bangladesh, dowry means *daabi* or 'demand'. Dowry is defined as property or valuable security which the bride party gives or agrees to give to the bridegroom party as the essential requirement for marriage. The dowry can be in many forms: cash money, the expense for the bride's dress, ornaments and cosmetics, a large marriage feast, a job for the groom, expenses for going abroad, land, a house or goods (e.g. radio, watch, bicycle, motorcycle). If the demands are not agreed to, then the marriage does not take place. If an agreement has been reached but the transaction has not been carried out by the time of the marriage or shortly thereafter, then the bride is inevitably subjected to harassment, abuse or divorce (Ahmed & Nahar, 1987). In Bangladesh, dowry-related violence is on the increase. It has been estimated that 85 per cent of the women become victims of various forms of oppression in connection with the dowry (Dhar, 2002).

Blanchet (1996) has observed that the dowry is usually smaller when the bride is very young. Rahela relates:

> *My elder sister was married off at 20. So my parents had to give a big dowry. When I was only 12, my parents received many marriage proposals for me. But the demands made by the bridegroom parties were not so high because of my young age. So my poor father was compelled to marry me off at the age of 12.*

Necessity for women to have guardians

In their study, Ahmen and Nahar (1987: 186) pointed out that, 'Women are regarded as weak and vulnerable and in constant need of male guardianship, patronage, protection and security'. Villagers believe that it is important to marry off girls when they reach menarche. Sakina was 12 when she got married. Because she had lost her father and mother, the villagers collected money and arranged for her to be married so that she could have a male guardian. In Bangladeshi society it is believed that women are unable to support and protect themselves and male guardianship is necessary to prevent possible rape. Jahan and Islam (1997: 14) pointed out that rape 'is the worst form of intimidation used by men to demonstrate their dominating position. A woman's right to bodily security is violated in the grossest possible way'. Marriage is important in women's lives because they lack security in Bangladesh. They are insecure if not accompanied by a man, although there are reports of women being sexually harassed, raped or even killed in front of their male family members. The sexual harassment of women is a fairly common occurrence at the country's universities. In a survey, Putul and Munnii (1999) found that many female university students are the victims of direct or indirect sexual harassment by their male teachers. In another study (Kabir, 1998) it was reported that female university students are frequently sexually abused, harassed or raped, either by their male classmates, other students or even some of the respected teachers. The Jahangirnagar University Fact-Finding Committee reported in 1998 that 20 cases of rape and over 300 of sexual assault took place at that university (*Star Weekend Magazine*, 1998). According to a daily newspaper report, four elected women members of Union Parisad (Council) were raped in a five-month period during 1999 (*Daily Janakantha*, 19 May 1999). The situation throughout the country is bleak and frustrating. The Police Department's Annual Report of 2001 showed that there was an average of ten reported incidents of the rape of women every day. Another report revealed that in that same year there were 4,517 reported cases of rape. Of these, 141 were gang rapes. Seventy-one women were killed after having been raped (*Jugantor*, 8 March 2002). Generally, most of the victims of rape do not report to the police for fear of public disgrace and lack of security. Some girls commit suicide to escape social disgrace (*Prothom Alo*, 8 March 2002). In a study on garment workers, Majumder stated,

> In the existing social context of Bangladesh, living alone is not safe and secure for young women. . . . The female garment workers living in mess remain always occupied with the fear of attack by the local touts, flesh traders, drug addicts and above all by the landlords and their sons. Majumder (2000: 15–16)

During my fieldwork there was a case of a 25-year-old man in the village who had raped a seven-year-old girl; the girl died after the rape. In connection with that incident, many of the villagers, both men and women, told me, 'This is the reason we want to marry off our daughters at an early age. We are not so afraid of this happening after marriage'.

Provocations by male youths

Young girls are frequently subjected to harrassement from young unmarried men, which threatens the security of many families. Girls are married off at an early age to avoid being exposed to the provocations. Some youths, if their proposal of marriage is rejected by the girl or her family, will counter with threats of violence, e.g. to rape the girl, kidnap her or throw acid at her. In addition, girls are constantly being harassed by rowdy youths in the street. Thus poor families in the village are forced to live under insecure conditions. Social prestige is important to them, and to maintain that prestige they marry off their girls at an early age. Hawa explains:

> *I was 11 years old. My father had two wives. One wife lived in Noakhali, our home district. My mother lived with my father. My father was a labour leader in a mill. I had six brothers and three sisters. I was married off before reaching menarche. My family received anonymous letters and many boys were interested in marrying me. An anonymous letter-writer wrote that if I didn't marry him, I would be thrown in the river. My private tutor was also interested in marrying me. He was 20 and his educational background was an SSC. So my family agreed to his proposal. After my marriage the spoiled youth did not disturb me, because now I am another person's wife.*

Girls' beauty

Beautiful girls are married off at an early age. Guardians feel more insecure about the welfare of beautiful girls. In Bangladeshi society, education and economic solvency are considered the bridegroom's main claim to eligibility. Comeliness is not important in a boy or man. But beauty in a girl or woman is very important for marriage. The

comment made by a female university teacher is a good example of this view. After the birth of her daughter, the teacher told her colleague, 'Doesn't my daughter look beautiful? After all, I have to marry her off'. Villagers informed me that girls with a fair complexion and attractive appearance are regarded as beautiful, but not girls who have a slim figure. It is thought that if girls are not big and healthy, they will become ill after the birth of their children; in Bangladesh, after giving birth to children most women become ill due to malnutrition and hard work. Girls with smooth skin are considered beautiful but the villagers do not regard height as an important criterion of beauty. All potential bridegrooms want to marry a beautiful girl. The guardian of a beautiful young girl will quickly find her an eligible bridegroom rather than risk not finding one later on. Consequently, beautiful girls are married off at an early age. Besides, the youths hanging out on the streets of the village are more likely to harass an attractive girl than one whom they regard as less attractive. Noin relates:

> *I was being harassed by a young hoodlum because of my attractive appearance. So I was married off at an early age. My father was the labour leader at a jute mill. We were not poor. I read up to the fifth grade. In 1985 I was married off at the age of ten. I got many proposals for marriage. Many boys proposed to me on the way to school. Those boys did nothing but spend all their time hanging out on the street. Their ages ranged from 15–25 years. My father did not want to marry me off to these boys. One night my family received an anonymous letter with a threat to kidnap me and kill my whole family. Then my cousin Bari expressed an interest in marrying me. Bari was 25 years old and had read up to the seventh grade and was a labourer in a jute mill. Bari thought I was beautiful and attractive. If he did not marry me, I might be married off to another boy. So he married me though I was not of marriageable age.*

Shame

Society places utmost importance on female sexual purity; the good reputation of the lineage depends on it (Rozario, 1992). To have unmarried mature girls is shameful for a family. These girls are perceived as being unable to control their sexuality. It is said that unmarried mature girls will leave home to have sex. Against this backdrop in Bangladesh, female sexuality is controlled through early marriage and the custom of *purdah*, which limits the social interactions between men and women (Amin, Diamond, Naved & Newby, 1998). We can understand the importance of female sexual purity from the comment of Hawa's husband, 'I married Hawa when she was 11 because I decided to go abroad, and mature girls lose their good character when their husbands go abroad'. Child marriage occurs because of the importance of female sexual purity. A village woman comments:

> *It brings dishonour if a girl of a poor family gets involved in a love affair. Some girls get involved in physical relationships and become pregnant. Our girls are ignorant and they do not understand how to protect the honour of the family and that is why families arrange child marriage.*

Village girls are not allowed to talk to men who come from outside the family; but they still manage to become involved in romantic attachments (Sattar & Huq, 1992). In many cases girls become involved with ineligible boys with whom marriage is not possible.

Education and economic solvency are criteria that determine the eligibility of a bridegroom. Generally the boys involved in love affairs are 15–25 years old, are neither educated nor financially solvent and mostly hang out on the street. It is impossible for parents to marry off their daughters to such boys. Generally, most romantic attachments turn into sexual relationships. These activities take place on the way to school, in paddy fields, in the jungle, along the banks of a pool of water (*jhil*) or at home while the guardians are absent. Sometimes when the girl becomes pregnant the boy denies any involvement. But if a girl is known to have a romantic attachment, her purity is questioned and this brings shame on herself and her family. To protect the family from this kind of dishonour, parents opt for child marriage. Rehana relates:

> *I was married off at an early age for being involved in a romance. I was 13 in 1986. I was involved with Kamal, a college boy, before I started to menstruate. Kamal lived near my grandfather's house. After we exchanged 8 or 9 letters, I started to menstruate. My cousin Shamim read those letters. At one stage, Shamim wanted to have a relationship with me. Shamin was 27 and had read up the tenth grade. I decided to pretend to be Shamim's lover, but one time I felt that I was deeply involved with Shamim and I deceived Kamal and then stopped the relationship. I met Shamim on the way to school. My mother did not like Shamim because he was unemployed. My family tried hard to convince me to break off the affair. But I did not listen to anyone. Then my father married me off to Asad who was 32 and had attained an SSC and was now a bank clerk.*

It is thought that if a girl is still unmarried after reaching menarche, it is because she has not received any marriage proposals, and this is a dishonour for the family. Khaleda, who was 16 years old, was not regarded as beautiful and did not receive any marriage proposals. This brought shame to Khaleda's family.

Property

Generally, villagers do not want to transfer their property to another family and this is one of the reasons for child marriage. As mentioned earlier, of 48 households in Chamabro, 30 owned only their dwelling house, while the remaining 18 had some cultivable land as well, although the size of these land holdings was very small. For this reason there were no incidences in Chambro of child marriage for the purpose of avoiding the transfer of property. However, in the neighbouring village of Sufia, a 12-year-old girl was married off to her first cousin Selim. Sufia was her parents' only child and they had some land. If she married a boy of another family, the property would have been transferred to that family. To protect the family's property, she was married off to her first cousin at the age of twelve. Because Sufia's parents were afraid that this bridegroom might not be unavailable when she was older, she became a child bride.

Child marriage in the light of exchange theory: a discussion

The fundamental assumption of all exchange theories is that people always seek to make some profit in their exchange transactions with others, transactions that are governed by considerations of costs and benefits. Here I will discuss why the rural people of Bangladesh marry off their daughters at an early age. Do they think that they will profit from it? If so, what are the profits?

Through marriage, the men and women of Bangladesh can enter into legally sanctioned sexual relationships. Any offspring from marital relationships are socially and legally recognised as legitimate. Sexual purity, which is of utmost importance for the reputation and honour of the family, is not questioned if the woman is married. Families can get rid of shame by marrying off their daughters. If marriage is delayed, the girl might become involved in a romantic attachment and her purity might be questioned. Child marriage prevents girls from having pre-marital sexual relations, which are not permitted in Bangladesh. In the case of an unmarried mature girl it is said that nobody has asked her, and this brings dishonour to the family. Child marriage protects the family from this type of shame. In poverty-stricken Bangladeshi villages, girls are regarded as a burden. Through marriage parents can transfer this burden to their daughter's husband and his family. As we have seen, for various reasons men in Bangladesh prefer to marry child brides. As parents can pay a smaller dowry at the marriage of their very young daughters, child marriage protects the bride's family from high demands by the bridegroom party. Sometimes child marriages are arranged to satisfy the wishes of the guardian and to protect the family's property. Girls also get some sort of security after marriage. These are the benefits of child marriage, but they incur huge costs. Among the costs are early and frequent pregnancies; in addition, the young mothers are at risk of difficult deliveries. Furthermore, child marriage causes sexual disharmony and other maladjustments. Moreover, it is a violation of basic human rights. It denies girls their childhood and adolescence, curtails their continued education and undermines women's basic freedoms and self-reliance. Despite these heavy costs, the village people of Bangladesh, as exemplified by the villagers in this study, believe that the benefits they receive from child marriage outweigh the costs.

Conclusion

At present the number of child marriages is declining in Bangladesh. It would appear that an important change is taking place. In the past, girls as young as 6–9 were generally married off. Although the mean age for women at the time of their marriage has risen to 20.2, nearly half of all girls are married off between the ages of 14 and 17. The predominant patriarchal values of the society have not changed. It was believed earlier that education and economic solvency would liberate women. We now know that education and economic solvency alone cannot change deeply entrenched social values; Bangladeshi society does not honour even highly educated and financially solvent women if they are unmarried. For women, it is unthinkable to remain unmarried.

In Bangladesh, female sexuality is controlled through early marriage and through the custom of *purdah,* which limits social interactions between men and women. What will happen if a suitable bridegroom cannot be found in the future? This apprehension often lies behind child marriage. In rural Bangladesh men prioritise child brides. As the dowry system is a great problem for the families of poor Bangladeshi girls, marrying off their daughters at an early age is a way to reduce the size of the dowry.

How can we prevent child marriage? Here are a few suggestions. The state should take adequate measures to change male attitudes that are a main cause of child marriage. From primary to higher levels of education, women's studies should be included in the syllabus. Mass media can play an important role in raising the public's awareness of the dangers associated with child marriage. Girls should have the same rights and obligations to look after their natal families; if this became a strong social value, then girls would not be considered a burden to their poverty-stricken families. In addition, the incidence of rape and sexual harassment is increasing at an alarming rate in Bangladesh. If the state cannot ensure the security of women, then the people of Bangladesh will be confirmed in their belief that women are weak and in constant need of the protection of male guardians, which will further encourage the practice of child marriage.

Acknowledgements

This research project was funded by the Grameen Trust, Bangladesh. This article is a revised version of the original report.

References

Ahmed R, Nahar MS (1987). *Brides and the demand system in Bangladesh – a study*. Dhaka, Centre for Social Studies.

Amin S, Daimond I, Naved RT, Newby M (1998). Transition to adulthood of female garment-factory workers in Bangladesh. *Studies in Family Planning* 29: 185–200.

Aziz A, Maloney C (1985). *Life stages, gender and fertility in Bangladesh*. Dhaka, ICDDR, B.

Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2001). *Statistical Yearbook of Bangladesh 1999*. Dhaka, Statistics Division, Ministry of Planning.

Begum S (1993). Nari Nirjatoner Akti Dik: Bie, Baibahik Shamparka O Matritto [An aspect of women's oppression: marriage, marital relations and motherhood]. In: Jahangir BK, Khan ZR, eds. *Bangladeshe Nari Nirjaton* [Women's oppression in Bangladesh]. Dhaka, Samaj Nirikkhan Kendra.

Bhuiya R (1986). *Bibaho O Bibaho Bichchede Muslim Narir Aingoto Adhikar* [The legal rights of Muslim women in marriage and divorce]. Dhaka,Women for Women.

Blanchet T (1996). *Lost innocence, stolen childhoods.* Dhaka, University Press Limited.

Blau PM (1964). *Exchange and power in social life.* New York, John Wiley & Sons.

Chen MA (1993). *A quiet revolution: women in transition in rural Bangladesh*. Dhaka, BRAC Prokashana.

Chowdhury D (1995). Women's participation in the formal structure and decision-making bodies in Bangladesh. In: Jahan R, Qadir SR, Begum HA, Huq J, eds. *Empowerment of women: Nairobi to Beijing (1985–1995)*. Dhaka, Women for Women.

Chowdhury N (1997). Bangladesh: gender issues and politics in a patriarchy. In: Nelson B, Chowdhury N, eds. *Women and Politics: Worldwide*. Delhi, Oxford University Press.

Daily Janakantha (1999). (Bangladeshi national daily newspaper), 19 May.

Dhar S (2002). Nari Nirjaton Barche [Oppression of women is increasing]. *Prothom Alo* (Bangladeshi national daily newspaper), 8 March.

Dyer ED (1983). *Courtship, marriage, and family: American style.* Homewood, IL, The Dorsey Press.

Frazer JG (1919). *Folklore in the Old Testament*. Vol. 11. London, Macmillan & Co.

Hamid S (1996). *Why women count: essays on women in development in Bangladesh*. Dhaka, University Press Limited.

Homans GC (1961). *Social behaviour: its elementary forms*. New York, Harcourt, Brace & World.

Hossain S (1990). *Maye- Shishu* [Girl child]. Dhaka, UNICEF.

Hours B (1995). *Islam and development in Bangladesh.* Dhaka, Centre for Social Studies.

Jahan R (1975). Women in Bangladesh. In: *Women for women, Bangladesh 1975*. Dhaka, University Press Limited.

Jahan R, Islam M (1997). *Violence against women in Bangladesh: analysis and action*. Dhaka, Women for Women and South Asian Association for Women's Studies.

Jugantor (2002). (Bangladeshi national daily newspaper) 8 March.

Kabir AHM (1998). The Rape of a Nation's Conscience. *The Daily Star*, 4 October.

Khan S (1993). *The fifty percent: women in development and policy in Bangladesh*. Dhaka, University Press Limited.

Kotalova J (1996). *Belonging to others. Cultural construction of womenhood in a village in Bangladesh*. Dhaka, University Press Limited.

Levi-Strauss C (1969). *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Boston, Beacon Press.

Majumder PP (2000). Violence and hazards suffered by women in wage employment: a case of women working in the export-oriented garment industry of Bangladesh. *Empowerment* 7: 1–30.

Malinowski B (1922). *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.

Mauss M (1925). *Essai sur le don in Sociologie et Anthropologie.* Paris, Presses Universitaires de France. Translated into English as *The Gift* (by Ian Cunnison). New York, The Free Press, 1954.

Morshed SM (1999). Status of women in Bangladesh. *Labour* 4: 1–16.

Naher MS (1985). Marriage patterns: customs and changes in rural Bangladesh. *The Journal of Social Studies* 30: 91–103.

Planning Commission (1998). *The Fifth Five-Year Plan 1997–2002*. Dhaka, Ministry of Planning.

Prothom Alo (2002). (Bangladeshi national daily newspaper) 8 March.

Putul SR, Munnii SS (1999). Where professors proposition pupils. In: *The Independent* (Bangladeshi national daily newspaper) 9 July.

Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS) (1990). *Why marriages break up – a study on divorce in rural Bangladesh*. Bangladesh, LWF/World Service.

Rozario S (1992). *Purity and communal boundaries: women and social change in a Bangladeshi village*. Australia, Allen & Unwin, Australia Pvt. Ltd.

Sattar A, Huq N (1992). *Marriage: through the eyes of adolescent girls*. Dhaka, BARC.

Sobhan S (1978). *Legal status of women in Bangladesh*. Dhaka, The Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs.

Star Weekend Magazine (1998). Vol. 3, Issue 119, 2–8 October.

The Daily Star (2002). 16 March.

UNICEF (2001). *The realities of girls' lives in South Asia. An overview of trends and disparities.* Katmandu, UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia.

White SC (1992). *Arguing with the crocodile: gender and class in Bangladesh*. Dhaka, University Press Limited.