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A Stolen Childhood: How Child Marriage Undermines Education and Well-being in the Post-2020 Era

Abstract: Child marriage defined as any formal or informal union before the age of 18 remains a pervasive problem globally, particularly in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. The paper evaluates the resilience of child marriage in the post-2020 period, specifically in Bangladesh and the role that it plays in the education and welfare of children. Although there have been slow improvements, more than 38 million women all over the world and approximately half of Bangladeshi girls are under 18 years. Poverty, tradition and economic pressure drive the practice which contravenes the right of children to education and health. Following a literature-based approach, the paper analyzes recent statistics and examples of NGOs, UNICEF, and academic reports. The discussion reveals that child marriage has a great impact on school dropouts, early sex and domestic violence whereby families fall into the trap of poverty. COVID-19 increased such trends and the numbers of early marriages during school closure were on the increase. The paper has also made some recommendations on how the law enforcement, social protection and community programs can be strengthened to ensure the protection of the children rights and their future.

Keywords: Child marriage; Education; Well-being; Bangladesh; Post 2020 Era

Introduction

Child marriage, a marriage where one or both partners are below 18 years old, is denying millions of girls their childhood, education and health [1]. Approximately 38 million women aged 20 to 24 are first married off, and 12 million girls less than 18 years old are married annually worldwide [1, 11]. The problem is against the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which ensures all children a right to education, health and access to protection against violence [11]. In Bangladesh, where there are about 13 million child brides under the age of 15, poverty and deeply rooted cultural beliefs are the reasons behind early marriages [1, 11]. Even though marriage laws under 18 are prohibited, the law is not enforced in most rural regions. Girls frequently drop out of school to become homeworkers or brides to men they hardly know [1, 8]. This paper questions how child marriage is still present in the years 2020 and why it is harmful to the schooling and health of the children. It also reviews existing legislation and initiatives, points out loopholes and proposes solutions to safeguard the rights and future of girls [1].

Background and Significance: Child marriage in Bangladesh is a problem with regional and even international trends. Almost half of all child brides globally are located in South Asia, although prevalence has also decreased by almost 50-28 in the last 10 years [11, 13]. The child marriage rate in Bangladesh has been decreasing since 1994, which was approximately 79 percent, to 51 percent in 2019 due to the better education of girls and specific programs, such as the Female Secondary School Stipend [13]. Nevertheless, approximately 15 percent of girls are married at the age of below 15 [11]. In the rural settings especially, poverty and the issues of the ages tend to force families to marry off their girls at a tender age [2][3]. Bangladesh married girls are four times more likely than non-married girls to be out of school and most of them give birth during their adolescence which puts their health at risk [8]. These aspects support poverty and inequality cycles. The pandemic threatens breakthrough further with the COVID-19 pandemic. During 2020,

school closures and economic shocks resulted in a set of conditions that promoted a revival of child marriage [7, 14]. By 2030, it has been estimated through studies that millions of new child marriages all over the world may be linked to pandemic-related stressors [14]. During lockdowns, there were sharp rises in early marriages in Bangladesh, with one estimate showing under-18 marriages had risen by 220 percent by mid-2020 as families were struggling with financial hardship. These patterns highlight the importance of the instability of gains and inspire this study.

Research Question

Why does child marriage continue to occur in the post-2020 era, particularly in Bangladesh, and how does it affect girls' education and well-being?

Literature Review

Prevalence and Trends: Child marriage is still very prevalent. According to reports published by UNICEF, an estimated 20 percent of the all young women in the world were married off by age 18 in 2020, a reduction of 25 percent of the same age group that was married in the early 2000s. South Asia has a high proportion: almost half of all child brides reside in this area, though there are slight decreases. One of the countries that have the highest rates is Bangladesh. Approximately 51 percent of girls in Bangladesh get married at the age of under 18, as of 2022, which is one of the highest rates in Asia [11]. Rural and poor communities are particularly high with the girls who are either secondary school educated or higher being 72.94 percent less likely to marry early than girls who have not attended school at all [6].

Drivers of Child Marriage: Child marriage in Bangladesh and other related areas depends on a variety of different causes. One reason is poverty: when families have few resources, they may find daughters to be a financial burden since marriage will ease the burden of feeding, education, and dowry payments [7, 12]. Conventional social codes and gender inequality are also key factors. The education of girls is not considered a priority in most of the villages and early marriage is perceived as a norm or as a way of securing the future of a daughter [4, 5]. To illustrate, studies establish that there are parents who force their children into marrying off daughters during adolescence so as to have financial stability with an adult husband [5]. Gender discrimination is also observed as the girls are not encouraged to work outside, and domestic abuse may be accepted, which does not give girls freedom in their lives [9]. Poverty and custom have therefore been the driving force behind the origins of many families getting into early marriages in an attempt to find a solution to the problem.

Impacts on Education and Well-being: There is a consistent literature that child marriage adversely affects the education and well-being of girls. Girls who are married have a high probability of dropping out of school. As an example, according to UNICEF statistics, married adolescent girls in Bangladesh are more than four times more likely to be out of school as compared to their unmarried counterparts. The loss of education means loss of opportunities in future and entraps families into poverty. The health outcomes are devastating, child brides usually give birth at the age of teens, and they are much more likely to experience pregnancy complications, maternal and infant mortality [8]. According to UNICEF, child brides are also at high-risk of malnutrition and mental distress. In addition, early marriage subjects girls to domestic violence and reproductive coercion. Research indicates that married teenage girls are often physically, sexually and emotionally abused by spouses and other in-laws [9]. The psychosocial

consequences are significant: being isolated and being in the hands of their husbands, a significant proportion of young brides have become chronically stressed, depressed, and hopeless.

Legal and Policy Context: Bangladesh has the law against marriage below 18 and is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). In theory all children are entitled to education and protection, which is not strong in practice. Thousands of instances of girls being forcibly taken out of school or forced into marriage were reported by UNICEF during COVID-19 [11]. Ending child marriage efforts worldwide involve tightening of laws and conditional cash transfer programs. As an example, the countrywide stipend program of secondary school education of girls in Bangladesh has contributed to a lower rate of marriage through an incentive of education [13]. NGOs such as Girls Not Brides emphasize the necessity to speed up the pace; recent conclusions indicate that the current trends of decline (such as a decline in the child marriage rate in India between 2001/2021 by 4923 percent) are not steep enough to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals [9, 13].

Research Gaps: Although numerous studies elaborate on the factors and consequences of child marriage, few studies have been conducted to explain the dynamics of child marriage in the immediate post-2020 period and when it occurs during the pandemic. Crises are increasingly proving to revert progress: studies on West Africa Ebola revealed that the long-term exposure of schools caused the number of early marriages and teen pregnancies to skyrocket [14]. However, not many studies have comprehensively reported the impact of COVID-19 on child marriage in Bangladesh, and what had been effective in that setting. The present article helps to bridge that gap by summarizing recent statistics and case studies.

Methodology

The study is a literature review approach based on qualitative research. We examined current literature such as UNICEF reports, NGO reports, academic publications, news stories about child marriage in Bangladesh and in the rest of the world. The main sources were the data briefs released by UNICEF [11, 13], program evaluations [8], and case studies on the effects of COVID-era [7, 14]. Secondary data (e.g., UNICEF country profiles) is also used in the analysis to determine trends in child marriage rates and related education rates [1, 8]. Empirical evidence (where it exists) (Markov-model forecasts by Yukich et al. [14] and also quick forecasts by Fletcher [15]) were applied to understand plausible effects of pandemics. Data compiled in these sources was used in combination to address the research question and to indicate the trends on causes, consequences, and policy responses. All the references are to official published or online sources published 1989/25, which guarantees a more current point of view.

Results and Analysis

Persistence of Child Marriage Post-2020: The data show that child marriage continues to exist in Bangladesh and most other low-income environments. UNICEF country report indicates that rates are slowly decreasing although approximately half of women in Bangladesh are married off before 18 years [11]. The rate is much more frequent in rural, less prosperous communities. As the case of UNICEF statistics, uneducated girls are dozens of times more likely to marry off as children than girls who received secondary education [6]. This is an indication that poverty and absence of education are closely related to early marriage. The COVID-19 period had more challenges.

Numerous reports of the pandemic lockdowns raising child marriage have been reported. In Bangladesh, a BRAC study reported a 220 percent increase in under-18 marriages in July-September 2020, crediting the increase to girls not being in school, and families strained by the financial crisis [7, 14]. According to a UNICEF analysis, the world will have up to 10 million additional child marriage incidents by 2030 unless measures are undertaken in this regard [14]. The urgency of these projections is emphasized: according to initial information in Bangladesh, a spike had been registered: one rural UNICEF helpline saved at least one girl (Labanno) just in time before she was to marry off in the 2020 crisis. Briefly, schools and social protection services provide the much-needed shield; when they deteriorate, child marriage will speed up.

Impact on Education: Child marriage has adverse effects on the education of girls. Statistics in Bangladesh have indicated that when girls are married, they are seldom at school. As mentioned by UNESCO and UNICEF estimates, the child brides were estimated to be more than four times out of school as compared to those who were not married [8]. The early school dropout is commonplace even in middle school: in village narratives girls drop out of school after 6th or 7th grade as they are sold [11]. After marriage, the girls are usually compelled by cultural norms to be on the domestic scene and bear children thus having little time to learn. This educational break makes girls vulnerable to poverty: they can find less ways of earning money and they can continue working with their husbands.

Impact on Health and Well-being: The health and well-being outcomes of child marriages are terrible. Girls who are married often get pregnant at young ages, which is one of the leading causes of maternal and infant mortality in low-income countries [8]. UNICEF estimates that one-third of child brides give birth to children under the age of 18 that puts them at increased risk of complications such as obstetric fistula, severe anemia and even death. Newborns are also susceptible to these complications, which also cause neonatal and under-five mortality. Other than maternal health, early marriage is related to domestic violence and mental health problems. Researchers report that child bride husbands tend to excuse violence as discipline. Younger females who marry are less empowered in the home and are more vulnerable to physical and sexual violence. Young brides are psychologically isolated, being locked at home and without friends, and most of them experience chronic stress, depression, and anxiety. Cases of girls committing suicide in that condition are tragic. In this way, child marriage harms the welfare of girls tremendously in various ways.

Economic and Social Analysis: Child marriage has its motives embedded with economic deprivation. Anecdotal during COVID-19 there were desperate choices where the parents felt that marriage was a means of passing on the monetary responsibility of raising a daughter to the groom's family. A UNICEF poll in Bangladesh showed that during the pandemic, as many as 40 percent of households had been pushed under the poverty line, which led some parents to regard the early marriage as an additional mouth to feed [7]. The long-term consequences of this short-term coping system, however, are high: it imparts intergenerational poverty. Nor do countries benefit economically: UNICEF South Asia has claimed that when young women are married off, societies are losing the advantage of their potential education and productivity. In the case with Bangladesh, child marriage is estimated to negatively impact the national development goals by decreasing the number of females in the workforce and raising the population growth rates, overstraining the public services. Culturally, social norms are in favor of or even promote early marriage. As an illustration, child marriage in some conservative regions of Bangladesh is actually

viewed as a method of providing girls with some sort of safety and honor [9]. According to the Joint Program to End Child Marriage (UNFPA-UNICEF), the law is there, but due to tradition and gender inequality, the law is ignored [11]. In places where civil registration is necessary, the majority of early marriages are done in an informal or religious way and are not open to legal review.

Effects of Interventions: According to the literature, education and cash incentives are effective deterrents. The age of marriage was largely postponed by the programs offering girls stipends to attend school in Bangladesh [13]. Poverty Action Lab analyses on incentive programs have concluded that when cash transfer to families or conditional schooling grants are provided, child marriage will be lowered by enhancing the value of school enrollment of girls [8]. Some NGOs attempted new methods during the pandemic: online classes, monitoring the community were used to maintain the interest of at-risk girls [12]. There were also success stories via helplines and awareness campaigns. According to reports by UNICEF, forced marriages were avoided thanks to helpline calls in case of lockdowns [14]. But the general agreement is that existing interventions need to be increased manifold. UNICEF suggests that in order to achieve SDG targets [9, 10], the rate of ending child marriage must speed up 817 times the current levels.

Conclusion

Child marriage continues to be a significant challenge to the schooling and health of female children in Bangladesh and other places. Poverty, tradition, and such crises as COVID-19 continue the practice even in the post-2020 era. As observed in the literature review, married girls are much higher in school dropout rates, poor health conditions, and both violence and isolation. These consequences are unrealistic and criminal to the rights of the children, and they put the family in the poverty trap. Multi-pronged action is needed in order to interrupt this cycle. This can be tightened by legal reinforcement of the age of marriage and birth registration, but these measures need to be accompanied by programs to retain girls in school and to better the economic status of vulnerable families. Education stipends and cash incentives have been a success in postponing marriage. It is essential to engage the community: to transform the norms, it is necessary to educate families about the dangers of early marriage and offer the girls safe environments where they can study and get assistance. Social safety nets and continuity of schooling were shown as preventive strategies to the COVID-19 crisis. Education and rights of girls should not just be a moral obligation as UNICEF states, but it is also cost-effective to nations. After all, the elimination of child marriage is the key to sustainable development and equality between genders. The study contends that it is only through a combination of policy, education and community intervention that the Bangladesh and other such states can avoid a regression and millions of girls will lose their childhoods. Defending that future of children requires a faster rate of change: investing more in schooling of girls, improving their health, reducing poverty; enforcing current legislation; and encouraging communities to see the potential in girls. Child marriage can only be tackled by addressing both the economic and cultural causes in ensuring that all children are entitled to safe, educated and healthy childhood.

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