

Child Marriage Dynamics in Kurigram District, Bangladesh: Investigating Causes and Consequences

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Abstract

Child marriage remains a critical issue in many parts of the world, including Kurigram District, Bangladesh. This study aims to explore the underlying causes and far-reaching consequences of child marriage in this region through qualitative research methods. By employing in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with affected individuals and key stakeholders, this research provides a comprehensive analysis of the factors contributing to the persistence of child marriage.

The findings reveal that poverty, lack of education, cultural traditions, and inadequate enforcement of legal frameworks are significant drivers of child marriage in the Kurigram District. Economic hardships compel families to marry off their daughters at a young age to reduce financial burdens. Additionally, societal norms and cultural practices perpetuate the acceptance of early marriage, often viewed as a protective measure against social stigmas and economic insecurities.

The consequences of child marriage are profound and multifaceted, affecting the physical, psychological, and socio-economic well-being of young girls. Early marriage often results in early pregnancies, posing severe health risks for young mothers and their infants. Furthermore, it curtails educational opportunities, limiting girls' personal and professional development potential. The study also highlights the psychological impact, including increased vulnerability to domestic violence and mental health issues.

By understanding the complex dynamics of child marriage in Kurigram District, this research contributes to the broader discourse on child protection and women's rights. The study concludes with recommendations for targeted interventions, including community education programs, economic support for vulnerable families, and more robust implementation of existing laws to mitigate the incidence of child marriage. Addressing these issues requires a collaborative effort from government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and local communities to create a supportive environment where girls can thrive and achieve their full potential.

Keywords: Child Marriage; Kurigram District; Qualitative Research; Poverty; Cultural Traditions; Women's Rights

1. INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh continues to be impacted by child marriage, which is a social and public health issue brought on by established societal norms, poverty, insecurity, and climate change. A further issue is the inadequate implementation of the legislation that currently prohibits underage marriage (Antora et al., 2019). By examining the complex causes and effects of child marriage, this research aims to shed light on the underlying causes of this damaging practice. In Kurigram, socio-economic disparities, cultural norms, and limited educational opportunities contribute significantly to the prevalence of child marriages. As a coping strategy, poverty frequently pushes families into early marriages, creating a cycle of vulnerability that lasts for generations. Deeply ingrained cultural norms occasionally place a higher priority on marriage than on a child's education and personal growth. Child marriage has severe implications for a child, impacting social, emotional, and physical development (Santosh et al., 2016).

Premature pregnancies brought on by early marriages frequently compromise health, increasing the rates of maternal and newborn deaths. Child brides and grooms also encounter obstacles in their pursuit of jobs and education, which feeds the cycle of poverty (Nahid, 2014). Understanding the causes and consequences of child marriage in Kurigram is crucial for implementing targeted interventions and policy changes. This research aims to provide valuable insights to inform strategies to eradicate these harmful practices and create a safer and more equitable future for children in Kurigram District. Child marriage is detrimental to the victim as well as to society at large. Child marriage has detrimental effects on society and violates children's rights, especially the right to education (Patoari, 2020). Since fewer young people can engage in the labour market and the economy, child marriage can also have a detrimental financial effect on society.

Despite the efforts made by governments, civil society organisations, and international organisations to address the issue, child marriage remains a development challenge for many developing countries (Naveed & Butt, 2020). It is a significant social problem affecting children's lives, especially girls in Kurigram. Not everyone is aware of the evils of child marriage in the study area. This study contributes to a better understanding of the causes and consequences of child marriage, raising public awareness and prevention of child marriage in Kurigram District.

Nomenclature

CM	Child Marriage
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
IDI	In-depth Interview
KII	Key Informant Interview
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
Ulipur	A sub-district (upazila) in Kurigram district, Bangladesh
Kurigram	A district in the Rangpur division of Bangladesh
Begumganj	A union within the Ulipur upazila in Kurigram district
Brahmaputra	A major river in South Asia, near which Begumganj Union is located

1.1 Objective of the Study

This study aims to investigate and understand the dynamics of child marriage in Kurigram District, Bangladesh. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Investigate the multifaceted roots, i.e., socio-economic, cultural, and legal factors contributing to the persistence of child marriage in Kurigram District.
2. Examine the impact of child marriage on the physical health, psychological well-being, and educational opportunities of affected girls.
3. Assess the broader socio-economic implications of child marriage for families and communities in Kurigram District.
4. Assess the effectiveness of existing legal and policy frameworks to prevent child marriage. Provide evidence-based recommendations for interventions and policy measures to reduce the incidence of child marriage and support affected individuals.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative approach to delve into the intricate dynamics of child marriage in Kurigram District, Bangladesh. Qualitative methodologies were meticulously employed during the research design phase to foster a deeper understanding of the subject matter. The research amalgamates primary and secondary data sources to provide a comprehensive insight into the contextual nuances. While secondary data offers a broad overview of the phenomenon, primary data serves as invaluable firsthand evidence, enriching the study with narratives, case studies, and a nuanced comprehension of the issue.

2.2 Respondents of the Study

The study was meticulously conducted in Begumganj, Baladoba, and Islampur villages, nestled within the Begumganj union of Ulipur upazila in Kurigram district, under the aegis of the Rangpur division. Purposeful sampling was employed to select participants deemed most pertinent and representative of the research focus. Various data collection methods, including FGD, IDI, and KII, were meticulously conducted. The study comprises 03 FGDs, each encompassing 8 participants of a homogeneous nature, along with 08 IDIs and 04 KIIs. Participants falling within the age group of 15-60 were selected for their potential to provide diverse perspectives.

In-depth interviews were conducted with young girls, purposefully selected based on their early marriage experiences alongside their families. Key informant interviews were conducted with stakeholders such as representatives from NGOs, community leaders, and healthcare professionals engaged in addressing child marriage-related issues. The utilization of open-ended and semi-structured questionnaires ensured comprehensive data collection. Ethical considerations and protocols were meticulously upheld throughout the fieldwork.

2.3 Research Procedure

The research followed a well-structured framework to ensure methodological rigour and reliability in data collection and analysis. The study's qualitative nature necessitated a systematic approach to uncovering the multifaceted dynamics of child marriage in the Kurigram District.

2.3.1 Selection of Study Areas

Begumganj, Baladoba, and Islampur villages, located within the Begumganj union of Ulipur upazila in Kurigram district, was purposefully chosen as the study areas. These locations were deemed representative of the district's socio-cultural and geographical diversity.

2.3.2 Participant Selection

Purposive sampling techniques were employed to select participants who could offer rich insights into the phenomenon of child marriage. Criteria for participant selection included age (15-60) and direct or indirect involvement in child marriage-related issues.

2.3.3 Data Collection Methods

Various qualitative data collection methods were utilized, including:

- FGD: Three FGDs were conducted, each comprising eight participants with homogeneous characteristics. These discussions provided a platform for participants to engage in open dialogue and share their perspectives and experiences.
- IDI: Eight in-depth interviews were conducted with girls married before 18 or 21 and their families. These interviews aimed to delve deeply into personal narratives and experiences related to child marriage.
- KII: Four key informant interviews were conducted with NGO representatives, community leaders, and healthcare professionals actively addressing child marriage issues. These interviews provided valuable insights into the broader socio-cultural and institutional dimensions of child marriage.

2.3.4 Data Collection Tools

Open-ended and semi-structured questionnaires were meticulously crafted to guide the data collection process. These tools facilitated the exploration of critical themes and allowed for flexibility in capturing diverse perspectives.

2.3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data collected from FGDs, IDIs, and KIIs. Transcripts were systematically coded and categorized to identify recurring themes and patterns, providing a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding child marriage in the Kurigram District.

2.4 Ethical Consideration of the Study

Ethics is a cornerstone of effective and meaningful research, prioritizing participants' dignity, rights, safety, and well-being. Ethical concerns are heightened in qualitative or field methodologies, often involving prolonged and intimate personal engagement. However, these challenges can be addressed through adherence to established ethical principles, guiding researchers in navigating the complexities inherent in qualitative research.

A fundamental ethical principle in qualitative research is to avoid tampering with the natural setting under study, allowing for authentic observations and descriptions. Participant and nonparticipant observations, integral to qualitative research, raise unique ethical issues regarding consent, privacy, and deception.

The present study's ethical considerations were paramount, with meticulous attention to informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity. All participants provided voluntary and informed consent, free from coercion or undue pressure. Sensitivity to the data's confidentiality was maintained, particularly for those who preferred not to be tape-recorded, with exact quotations documented alongside comments. Confidentiality was also ensured between interviewees. Moreover, participants were assured of strict confidentiality to protect their anonymity, with pseudonyms assigned to safeguard their identities. Measures were implemented to protect participants from undue distress, indignity, physical discomfort, embarrassment, or harm, ensuring their well-being throughout the research process.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 Causes of CM

There are many causes or reasons for child marriage. The study found that numerous factors lead to child marriage, such as poverty, a lack of knowledge and awareness, gender inequality, traditional and cultural customs, a dowry system, a lack of economic opportunities, and a sense of insecurity. However, one of the Key Informant interviewees believes that poverty and feelings of social insecurity about girls are the primary causes of child marriage.

3.1.1 Poverty

Poverty is a significant factor in child marriage in the Northern part of Bangladesh, especially in the Ulipur upazila in the Kurigram district. One of the primary reasons for poverty in the study areas is natural disasters. Floods and river bank erosion are common problems here. During the monsoon period, excessive rainfall and the uneven water flow in the Brahmaputra River caused floods in the study areas, especially in Charlands. Consequently, many families are struggling to make ends meet, and some may resort to child marriage as a means to alleviate their financial burden. They believe that marriage can give a girl economic security in society. One of the KIIs respondents stated, *"I believe that the primary factor driving child marriage in Begumganj is poverty. Due to poverty, families from the lower and middle classes marry off their young daughters before they reach the age of 18. They perceive that once their daughters are married, they will no longer be responsible for their upkeep."*

During an extensive interview, Momota (28 years old) recounted her ordeal, remarking, "I am the eldest of six sisters and have one brother. My father, a daily wage labourer, remains the sole provider for our family through his employment. As the eldest daughter, I was wedded at a tender age. Our household endured acute financial distress, grappling with the affordability of fundamental essentials such as sustenance. During this period, my family perceived marriage as a means to alleviate considerable burdens and secure our subsistence. Consequently, I was married early to ensure adequate sustenance."

3.1.2 Lack of education and awareness

Girls are more likely to be married at an early age if they have less education. Unprivileged girls in these areas are less likely to get the opportunity of education and be able to make informed decisions about their lives. Additionally, they can be more susceptible to the traditional social norms that support child marriage. Many girls are unable to complete even their secondary education, making them vulnerable to early marriage. Ignorance and lack of awareness are among the main reasons why child marriages occur. An NGO worker in these areas shared experiences, stating, *"Child marriage persists due to a lack of education and awareness. If families were informed about the detrimental effects of child marriage, they would never subject their children to it."*

3.1.3 Gender discrimination

Another significant contributing factor to child marriage in Kurigram District is gender inequality. In a patriarchal society like Kurigram, girls are often seen as less valuable than boys. Consequently, women might face prejudice and be more vulnerable to being forced into marriage. In an IDI, one respondent expressed, *"Unaware lower-class families view their daughters as the family's responsibility. They believe that marrying them off as soon as possible is the appropriate course of action. They have no intention of educating their daughters further. They believe that by allocating funds for their son's education instead of their daughters, they can ensure a better future for them. The traditional belief within these families is that investing in sons rather than daughters will secure their future."*

3.1.4 Traditional norms and cultural practices

In many communities within the Rangpur Division, a solid cultural expectation exists for women to marry at a young age. The amount of dowry required varies depending on the girl's age and physical appearance. Families may be required to pay a higher dowry to the groom, and it is considered disrespectful if the girl exceeds the societal age limit for marriage. Because of these social expectations and social pressures, it is difficult for a young girl to resist getting married. In other cases, child marriage is even justified as a way to protect girls from sexual assault or to ensure their social security. Another significant finding of this study is that many families perceive marrying their daughter young as a good family tradition.

3.1.5 Limited Economic Opportunity

Girls are engaged in a wide range of economic activities, which they need to improve. Many girls and their families are unaware that they can run their businesses. Girls were underrepresented in the workforce because they could not advance their careers. Child marriage rates rise because many families do not want their daughters to be able to support themselves financially.

3.1.6 Sense of Insecurity

A sense of insecurity significantly influences child marriage. Girls who experience feelings of insecurity are more likely to agree to an early marriage in the hope of finding security and stability within a new husband and family. Several things can contribute to young girls' sense of insecurity. These individuals typically come from disadvantaged or marginalised backgrounds and are worried about their future financial security. Another factor is childhood experiences of abuse or violence, leaving a child feeling defenceless and uneasy. Moreover, families who are insecure about their daughter's social security are willing to marry off their daughters as early as possible.

However, contrary to the expectation, CM often fails to provide stability. Instead, it makes girls more vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and violence. Shahana (age 17) described her experience: *"I used to go to school regularly. Some mischievous boys would stand in the way and harass me and my classmates with offensive remarks. When my family found out, they became anxious and hurried to get me married instead of punishing the boys."*

3.2 Consequences of CM

According to the respondents, CM is a severe issue that significantly affects the lives of women and girls. It needs to stop since it violates women's rights. CM victims deal with a variety of issues described below.

3.2.1 Early Pregnancy - Health Complications

CM typically leads to early pregnancy, which has several adverse health effects. A child struggles to adapt to the rapid bodily and hormonal changes during pregnancy if they lack sexual knowledge and awareness of the physical changes associated with puberty. Consequently, severe reproductive health complications, newborn deaths, and maternal deaths often occur. Even mature women these days may lack the knowledge to provide appropriate guidance. However, women with maturity learn to be aware of pregnancy, childbirth, and the recovery period.

3.2.2 Dropping Out of School

Another consequence of child marriage is that girls who marry young often have to drop out of school. After marriage, it becomes increasingly challenging for a girl to continue her education due to various factors. Additionally, the limited opportunities for training and employment could significantly hinder their prospects for the future.

3.2.3 Domestic violence

The study found that domestic violence is frequently more common among younger married girls with lower levels of education. After marriage, the bride usually relocates to her husband's hometown or another location. This causes dropping out of school and loses her familiar social network as she is no longer with her family and friends. The girl is frequently expected to be obedient to her husband and his family because of her young age. For them, this distance from their families is emotionally taxing.

Furthermore, a significant age difference between partners frequently results in a higher rate of violence and forced sexual relations. Younger married girls are more likely to experience domestic violence after marriage. The study also found that Girls who marry young become reliant on their husbands, making them more susceptible to sexual and domestic violence, which can have long-term negative impacts on their mental and physical health.

3.2.4 Economic Deprivation

Child brides are disproportionately affected by poverty due to several interrelated factors. They often rely heavily on their husbands for financial support, lacking the education and skills necessary for employment. Early marriage frequently curtails educational opportunities, as young girls are withdrawn from school to assume domestic responsibilities, reducing their job prospects and confining them to low-paying, unskilled jobs if they manage to work at all. Societal norms and familial obligations often restrict them from seeking employment, and cultural expectations may further limit their opportunities. Additionally, health issues related to early pregnancy and childbirth strain their limited financial resources. This economic deprivation often extends to their children, perpetuating a cycle of poverty across generations.

3.2.5 Social Isolation

Child brides often have their relationships with family and friends severed. As a result, they might feel alone and abandoned.

3.2.6 Mental Health Problems

CM can result in a variety of mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. The physical, emotional, social, and financial well-being of the victim of child marriage may suffer long-term consequences.

3.2.7 Beyond the 'Above'

The study also uncovered additional issues resulting from child marriage beyond those mentioned earlier. Firstly, there are heightened risks of maternal and child mortality. Pregnant and postpartum women who marry as children face increased rates of infant and maternal mortality. Secondly, child brides are more likely to experience poverty due to their inability to work and their dependency. Furthermore, they are at a higher risk of divorce or widowhood. Husbands and in-laws, particularly senior female members of the family, are more prone to perpetrating violence against child brides. One respondent shared, *"After completing my secondary exams, I married. My in-laws assured me before our marriage that I could continue my education afterwards. However, after the marriage, they changed their mind, forcing me to discontinue my schooling. They argued that it was inappropriate for girls to pursue higher education. Soon after becoming pregnant, my health began to deteriorate rapidly. If things do not improve soon, my baby could die. Both my physical and mental health have suffered, and my family is in turmoil because of these circumstances."*

3.3 Existing Legal and Policy Frameworks to Prevent CM

Existing legal and policy frameworks are essential to prevent child marriage in Rangpur Division. In its second resolution to end CM, during its 71st session (December 2016), the UN General Assembly urged member states to amend or enact laws and policies to prevent child marriage. Bangladesh Government has undertaken a National Action Plan to End Child Marriage 2018-2019 under the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs. It shows that the percentage of marriages below 18 was 47 per cent in 2017 in Bangladesh. These action plan years have been considered as their foundation years aligning with the sustainable development goal taken by The United Nations in 2015. Bangladesh Government also initiated the *Child Marriage Restraint Act of 2017*. According to this act, the legal age of marriage in Bangladesh is 18 for girls and 21 for boys, as stipulated by the 2013 Children Act and reinforced by social conventions (Bangladesh Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, August 2018).

In addition to governmental initiatives, several NGOs, including BRAC, RDRS, Action Bangladesh, Plan International, etc., are actively working to abolish child marriage and raise awareness against early marriage. Despite the efforts of both governmental and non-governmental entities, CM remains widespread in the Kurigram District. The underlying factors contributing to this practice include traditional societal norms, poverty, factors related to natural disasters, gender inequality, poor implementation of legislation, and lack of education and awareness.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite concerted efforts by both governmental and non-governmental entities, child marriage remains widespread in northern Bangladesh, particularly in Kurigram. The persistence of this practice is driven by a complex interplay of factors, including traditional societal norms, poverty, natural disasters, gender inequality, ineffective implementation of legislation, and a lack of education and awareness. The practice of child marriage has profound negative consequences on individuals, families, and society at large, impacting social, economic, and health outcomes. Addressing child marriage requires comprehensive, well-coordinated, and sustained interventions. Solutions must address root causes, promote awareness, empower

girls, and implement supportive measures. By doing so, it is possible to create an environment where child marriage is actively prevented, enabling young girls to pursue education, live fulfilling lives, and contribute to national development. Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) necessitates reflecting on past initiatives and drawing lessons to inform future strategies.

To address and eliminate child marriage in the Kurigram district, the study's findings have been supplemented with the following recommendations:

- Strengthening the legal framework by creating specialised teams inside law enforcement agencies to effectively investigate and prosecute child marriage cases in the Kurigram district. To make sure the current laws against child marriage are strictly enforced.
- Community engagement and awareness through extensive community outreach programs and education campaigns to inform people about the risks associated with child marriage, including religious leaders, families, and community members.
- Establish all children's access to high-quality education in the district of Kurigram, with a focus on poor and underprivileged female students.
- Empowerment and skill development through programs that enable women and provide them with career training, job opportunities, life skills, and entrepreneurship.
- Establishment of easily accessible health facilities that provide reproductive health, counselling, and support services to young girls who are at risk of or affected by child marriage.
- Support and poverty alleviation through financial aid initiatives targeted at struggling families. One way to lessen the economic barriers that cause child marriage is to provide opportunities for employment and financial assistance.
- Combating child marriage by promoting collaboration between local communities, non - governmental organisations, government agencies, and civil society.
- Research and knowledge sharing through continuous investigation to find out more about the causes, consequences, and underlying elements of child marriage.

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