

DO ADOLESCENTS SUPPORT EARLY MARRIAGE IN BANGLADESH? EVIDENCE FROM STUDY

Rahman M M*, Kabir M*

* Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka, Bangladesh

ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a critical period for female adolescents as they have to make decisions regarding their marriage, education and work which would influence and determine their future course of life. Although, early marriage has negative consequences, still a proportion of female adolescents favour early marriage because of prevailing cultural norms. This paper attempts to investigate the factors influencing the adolescents' attitude towards early marriage among the married and unmarried female adolescents. This is a quantitative and qualitative study. A multistage cluster sampling technique was used to select the sample. For quantitative results, data on 3362 female adolescents from rural and urban areas irrespective of their marital status were analyzed. To supplement the results found in quantitative analysis, a series of focus group discussions were conducted among the adolescents. Analysis revealed that one fourth (25.9%) of the adolescents were in favour of early marriage. A number of societal factors influenced them towards early marriage, despite the fact that adolescents are aware of the consequences of maternal and child health. Multivariate logistic regression analysis showed that current marital status, years of schooling, work status and parental marital decision are important predictors of early marriage ($p < 0.05$). The study concluded that female education would be an important determinant of adolescent marriage. Therefore, opportunities and scope of education beyond secondary would help to bring change in the attitude towards early marriage.

Key Words: Attitude, Adolescent, Marriage.

INTRODUCTION

The word marriage may be taken to denote the action, contract, formality or ceremony by which the conjugal union of a male and a female is formed. It is usually defined as the legitimate union between a man and a woman.¹ Different religions viewed marriage as a religious duty and is consequently a moral safeguard as well as a social necessity. It serves as a means to emotional and sexual gratification and as a means of tension reduction. In Bangladesh, 89.9% of the population are Muslims,² where early and universal marriage is customary. Despite some

noticeable changes in recent years, most female marriages take place below the minimum legal age at marriage of 18 years. According to Islam et al.,³ mean age of female marriage is still reportedly below 15 years, with mean age being of 14.3 years. Although the government of Bangladesh in 1976 enacted the legal age at marriage as 18 years for females and 21 for males, the law is hardly maintained, especially in rural areas. As a result, the age at marriage remained low in rural areas. Considering this view, this study attempted to investigate the adolescents own views and perception of marriage.

Address for correspondence :

Dr. M. Mizanur Rahman

78/B, West Razabazar, Indira Road, Tejgaon, Dhaka - 1215, Bangladesh

Email: aniq@citechco.net

Received Date : 4th Sep, 2004

Accepted Date : 23rd Sep, 2005

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This was a cross sectional study conducted in both rural and urban areas of Bangladesh during 2000. Female adolescents aged 10-19 years constituted the study population. The World Health Organization (WHO) has defined adolescents to be in the age range 10-19 years. A stratified two-stage cluster sampling design was adopted. At the first stage, the clusters were selected and at the second stage all households were covered under the study. A total of 64 clusters (on an average a cluster has 200 households) were randomly selected from the list of the clusters. All married and unmarried adolescents were selected in a cluster with a ratio of 2:1. A total of 3362 adolescents were included in the sample. Data were collected from interview using a pre-designed interview schedule consisting of questions related to knowledge, perception about marriage, legal age at marriage, marital decision etc. Both uni-variate and bi-variate analyses were performed. Multivariate logistic regression analysis was used to identify the socio-economic and demographic factors which are significantly related to knowledge on marriage. Data analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS, version 10.0). Both uni-variate and bi-variate analysis were performed. Logistic regression analysis was used to identify the socio-economic and demographic variables that are significantly related to perception on selected variables. To supplement the quantitative results, a series of focus group discussions (FGDs) were also conducted among the married and unmarried adolescents. Trained and experienced female field investigators conducted FGDs with a moderator initiating the FGDs. On an average 4-5 female adolescents participated in each FGD. A total of six FGDs were conducted one for each geographical division using an unstructured guideline.

RESULTS

Socio-demographic characteristics

The mean age of the respondents was 16.2 ± 1.9 years with a range of 10 to 19 years. Among the respondents, 32.9% were unmarried and 67.1% were married. Their mean years of schooling was 4.7 ± 3.3 years. Among them, 23.3% were illiterate, 35.8% had 1-5 years of schooling and the rest had 6 and above years of schooling. Regarding parental education, more than two fifths (43.9%) fathers were illiterate whereas more than two thirds (70.7%) mothers were illiterate. The mean family size was 5.2. About one third (30.7%) of the adolescents were currently engaged in different income generating activities other than household work. More than half of the adolescents (56.4%) were from nuclear families and the rest from joint/ or extended families (43.6%). The median family income was Tk.2500.0

and about three fifths (59.0%) of the families had family income below Tk. 3000.0 (Table I).

Opinion on early marriage

Bangladeshi girls are socialized to take up their respective roles well before their puberty begins.⁴ As regards their opinion on early marriage, one fourth (25.9%) of the adolescents were in favour of early marriage before 18 years of age. In previous studies³ 17% of the adolescents opined for early marriage. Among the married adolescents, 32.3% were in favour of early marriage, whereas among the unmarried adolescent only 13.1% were in favour of early marriage. It was also found that current age and years of schooling appeared to be significantly associated in favour of early marriage ($p < 0.001$). The support for their early marriage might be due to the fact that these girls were mostly married during their teens (Table II).

Opinion in favour of early marriage

The adolescents were further asked to express their views on early marriage. The questions was whether they approve early marriage or not before attaining marriageable age. The main reason was cited to be societal such as “an adolescent has less chance to go astray (24.5%)” followed by “very difficult to get married at later ages (23.5%)”. “less troublesome to the parents (22.9%)”. In fact, if the marriage of girls is delayed, the parents feel embarrassed; they remain in constant anxiety that their daughter will not be married, timely marriage of girls free them from burden. The main focus of the respondent’s attitude towards favouring early marriage mostly centred on societal problems rather than economic and as such the respondents would opt for early marriage to protect the honour of their families. More than one eighth (14.5%) of the respondents, mentioned that young girls could be married off with less dowry and ornaments and this way lessens the burden of the parents to some extent. Similar picture was observed by Islam *et al.*,³ among the rural adolescents. (Table III)

Opinion not in favour of early marriage

Among the reasons cited for not in favour of early marriage, the health consequences of mothers and children were most common. More than three fourths (76.3%) of the respondents, viewed marrying off early is detrimental to maternal health. A girl marrying in adolescence will quickly find herself as a mother. She is often under pressure and obligation to bear a child to prove her fecundity and to please other family members. This leads to maternal health problem during pregnancy and childbirth (37.7%) and other reasons were their physical immaturity to bear a child, and difficulty in rearing an immature child (57.4%). Early marriage leads to marital conflict. Furthermore, marriage during teens puts serious setback on the way of continuing education (8.6%) (Table IV).

Table I : Socio-demographic characteristics of the adolescents (N=3362)

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Mean ± SD</i>
Age in years			
10-14	695	20.7	16.2±1.9
15-19	2667	79.3	
Marital status			
Unmarried	1106	32.9	
Married	2256	67.1	
Residence			
Rural	2056	61.2	
Urban	1306	38.8	
Years of schooling (Respondents)			
0	785	23.3	4.7±3.3
1-5	1204	35.8	
>6	1373	40.8	
Religion			
Non-Muslim	356	10.6	
Muslim	3006	89.4	
Literacy (Father)			
Illiterate	1477	43.9	
Literate	1885	56.1	
Literacy (Mother)			
Illiterate	2378	70.7	
Literate	984	29.3	
Work status			
No	2329	69.3	
Yes	1033	30.7	
Type of family			
Nuclear	1895	56.4	
Joint	1467	43.6	
Family size			
2-3	818	24.3	5.2±2.1
4-5	1206	35.9	
>6	1338	39.8	
Monthly family income (Tk.)			
<2000	661	22.8	Median income=
2000-3000	1049	36.2	Tk. 2500.0
3000-4000	704	24.3	
>4000	485	16.7	

Table II : Percentage distribution of respondents by opinion in favour of early marriage and marital status, age and years of schooling

Variables	N	Opinion on early marriage		p value of chi square
		Yes (n=874)	No (n=2488)	
		%	%	
Marital status				
Unmarried	1106	13.1	86.9	0.001
Married	2256	32.3	67.7	
Age in years				
10-14	695	17.8	82.2	0.001
15-19	2667	28.1	71.9	
Years of schooling				
0	785	25.5	74.5	0.001
1-5	1204	31.4	68.6	
≥6	1373	21.6	78.4	

Table III : Adolescents opinion in favour of early marriage

*Opinion in favour of early marriage (n=874)	Frequency	Percent
Less chance to go astray	214	24.5
Very difficult to get married at later ages	205	23.5
Less troublesome to the parents	200	22.9
Need less dowry	127	14.5
Will get desired bridegroom	105	12.0
Easy to child rearing due to early childbirth	68	7.8

* *Multiple responses*

Table IV : Adolescents opinion not in favour of early marriage

*Opinion not in favour of early marriage (n=2488)	Frequency	Percentage
Detrimental to mother's health	1899	76.3
Difficult for child rearing in early childbirth	1427	57.4
Mother may die during childbirth	938	37.7
Mother may become anaemic	624	25.1
Others (Immature in maintaining family, marital disharmony, discontinue education etc)	213	8.6

Table V : Adolescent's knowledge on legal age at marriage

Knowledge on legal age at marriage for female	Frequency	%
Correct knowledge	2099	62.4
Incorrect knowledge	1263	37.6
Knowledge on legal age at marriage for male		
Correct knowledge	403	12.0
Incorrect knowledge	2959	88.0

Table VI : Correlates of adolescent's attitude towards early marriage: Multivariate analysis

Independent variables	β	p value	Odds ratio	95 % CI
Age in years				
10-14 (RC)	-	-	-	-
15-19	-0.0056	0.9671	0.9944	0.7614-1.2987
Marital status				
Unmarried (RC)	-	-	-	-
Married	1.1159	0.0000	3.0524	2.3660-3.9380
Residence				
Rural(RC)				
Urban	0.0509	0.5837	1.0522	0.8772-1.2621
Years of schooling				
0 (RC)	-	-	-	-
1-5	0.4345	0.0001	1.5441	1.2451-1.9149
>6	0.1873	0.1303	1.2060	0.09462-1.5371
Literacy (Mother)				
Illiterate (RC)	-	-	-	-
Literate	0.0784	0.4545	1.0816	0.8807-1.3283
Work status				
No (RC)	-	-	-	-
Yes	0.3075	0.0006	1.3601	1.1414-1.6206
Legal age at marriage for female				
Incorrect knowledge (RC)	-	-	-	-
Correct knowledge	-0.2457	0.0046	0.7822	0.6600-0.9269
Marital consent				
Self (RC)	-	-	-	-
Parents	1.5501	0.0000	4.7118	3.6277-6.1199
Model chi square	384.264			
df	9			
Significance	0.0000			
N	3362			
Constant	-3.3743			

* *RC= Reference category*

** *Variables not included in the regression model are: religion, education (father), age at menarche i.e. these are not statistically significant in bi-variate analysis.*

Knowledge on legal age at marriage

In 1976, a government order, the minimum legal age at marriage in Bangladesh was fixed at 21 years for males and 18 years for females respectively. Majority of the adolescents did not know about the legal age at marriage. This paper investigated the extent of awareness of the adolescents about the legal age of marriage. Results revealed that 62.4% of the adolescents interviewed could correctly state the legal age at marriage for girls, whereas only 12.0% correctly knew about the legal age at marriage for boys. It is to be noted that older married adolescents had better knowledge about legal age at marriage for females than older unmarried adolescents who had better knowledge about the legal age at marriage for male and the difference was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). This indicates that adolescents are more conscious about their own age at marriage, but they were not well aware about the legal age at marriage for boy (Table V).

Marital consent

During marriage, marital consent is obtained from both bride and bridegroom. Prior to marriage, a discussion is usually held among members of the family. Views of adolescents about their marital decision are obtained. The analysis revealed that 21.8% of the adolescents opined that marital decision is absolutely a matter of the bride; 75.2% mentioned that parental decision is final for marriage and 2.9% mentioned that consensus is needed among the members of the family. In fact, sole decision making among the adolescents is very low. In most of the cases they depended on others views about marriage.

Correlates of early marriage-Multivariate analysis

Perry & Bussey⁵ opined that gender role development from childhood influences adolescents about what to adopt in their life span. According to them gender-role development is the process whereby children come to acquire behaviour, attitude, interests, emotional reactions and motives that are culturally defined. It is also assumed that these gender aspects are closely related to each other because they are expected to be consistent. Culturally, Bangladesh has strong traditional gender stereotype which influences to behave according to the culturally set rules.

In order to understand the dynamics of marriage, an attempt was made to evaluate the factors influencing the adolescent's attitude towards early marriage. Multivariate logistic regression analysis was carried out in which dependent variable, 'adolescent attitude' towards early marriage was dichotomized (yes/no). For predicting the factors influencing early marriage, variables which were significantly associated with attitude towards early marriage in bi-variate analysis were included in logistic regression analysis. Out of 11 variables, 8 variables showed significant association in bi-variate analysis were included in

the logistic regression model. The analysis revealed that current marital status, years of schooling, working status and marital decision appeared to be important predictors of attitude towards early marriage ($p < 0.05$). (Table VI)

In our socio-cultural perspectives, parents are the prime movers for decision making process regarding marriage of their children. The females are just to carry out the decision. From the beginning of life adolescents internalize these concepts. Other environmental factors have some influence on early marriage such as education, working status, but have shown a weaker association. School is an important place where socialization of children takes place. In adolescence, boys and girls spend a considerable amount of time in school where self esteem is developed. Higher education among boys or girls is supposed to develop constructive ideology about marriage and family life and thus, is less likely to support early marriage.⁵

DISCUSSION

Early marriage has more negative effects in the reproductive life of adolescents. From demographic point of view, early marriage lengthens the duration of the period of women at risk of getting pregnant⁶. In the absence of contraception, early marriage equates with the large number of children, a woman may have. Past studies confirmed that early marriage has also been associated with maternal, infant and child mortality. Maternal factors such as age of the mother, parity and birth interval constitute proximate determinants of child mortality⁷. The present study revealed that majority of the adolescents is aware of reproductive health consequences of early marriage. Although, one fourth of the adolescents are in favour of early marriage, they are the worse victims of traditional norms. In fact, the traditional marriage system, especially in the rural areas, great emphasis is given on protecting the family honour by ensuring that daughters are married off before they could bring disgrace to the family through either becoming pregnant outside marriage. As the parents are worried about their aged adolescent, the adolescents think so to minimize the tension and worries of their parents giving consent in early marriage. The economic status of the parents is one of the factors that encourage early marriage. Adolescents in poor families have nothing to do, the parents as well as the adolescent herself thinks her to be a burden in the family. So, it is better to marry, which may lessen the burden of the family. The focus group discussion and multivariate logistic regression analysis support that gender role identity and parental decision appeared to be the prime factor for early marriage which is most important for policy implications. Past studies confirmed that education appeared to have a significant positive association with age at marriage. The marriage of women with higher levels of education delayed at least two years or more than those of their illiterate

counterparts⁸. The increase of attitude towards early marriage in equal magnitude among the illiterate and primary level of education than secondary and higher level of education indicated that higher educated adolescents had some values in the family and declining to marry early.

Policy implications: The findings of the study suggest that the overall educational status of women and their parents have played a significant role in the family. Considering this view, it may be suggested that appropriate strategies and programmes be evolved to motivate the parents in general and illiterates in particular to initiate the marriage later especially after legal marriageable age of their daughters has been attained. Another suggestion may be that efforts be made to encourage the girls to attend school/college and after completion of education up to a certain level so that they can participate in income generating activities, which in turn would postpone early marriage and also bring honour both in parents and bridegroom's family.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The research was funded by a grant from Social Science Research Council (SSRC), Ministry of Planning, Government of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh. We acknowledge Director, SSRC for financial assistance.

REFERENCES

1. Ryan JA. The Catholic Encyclopaedia, Vol. IX. Robert Appleton Company, Online edition. NY. 2003.
2. Population Census 2001. National Report (Provisional). Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Planning Division, Ministry of Planning. Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. 2001.
3. Islam MN, Islam MM and Yusuf HKM. Fertility and Reproductive Health Status of Married Adolescents in rural Bangladesh. Planning, Development and Evaluation Unit, Ministry of Planning. Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. 1995.
4. Aziz KMA, and Maloney C. Life stages, Gender and Fertility in Bangladesh, ICDDR,B, Dhaka.1985
5. Katsurada E and Sugihara. Gender role identity, attitudes toward marriage and gender segregated school backgrounds. Sex roles: A Journal of research. In: http://www.findarticles.com/cf_dls/m2294/2002_sept/96736800/p/article.jhtml. Dated: 08/01/2004
6. Mc Doland PF . Social organization and nuptiality in developing societies, In: J. Cleland and J. Hobcraft (eds.). Reproductive Change in Developing Countries (Oxford: Oxford university Press), pp.87-144.1985.
7. Mosley, WH and Chen LC. An analytical framework for the study of child survival in developing countries. Population and Development Review 1984; 10(suppl):25-45
8. Islam MN and Ahmed AU. Age at First Marriage and its Determinants in Bangladesh. Asia Pacific Population Journal 1998; 13(2):73-92.

