

## **DETERMINANTS OF EARLY MARRIAGE AMONG WOMEN: AN EXPERIENCE FROM RURAL BANGLADESH**

**SHAHARIOR RAHMAN RAZU**

Khulna University, Khulna-9208, Bangladesh

razusocku@gmail.com

***Abstract:** This study investigates the socioeconomic determinants of early marriage among the women living in rural Bangladesh through an empirical cross-sectional research. The data were collected primarily from a sample of 576 ever married women using a semi-structured interview schedule. Results show that more than half of the respondents (58.3%) were early married and the mean age of the first marriage was 16.8. Both in bivariate and multivariate setups, respondents' age, religion, education level, family type, father's occupation and household income were found to be significantly associated with marital age ( $p < 0.001$ ).*

***Key words:** Bangladesh, Determinants, Early Marriage, Women.*

### **1. Introduction**

Early marriage or child marriage refers to marriages before the age of 18 (UNICEF 2016). It is a strong social norm particularly in the Indian subcontinent (Bates *et al.* 2007), and Bangladesh is no exception. The principal victims of early marriage are the young girls who live in the rural areas of the country. Around 64 percent of the girls in this country marry before the age of 18 (Ferdousi 2013) as the average age of marriage for girls is 16.4 years (Ame 2013). Though the Child Marriage Resistance Act, 1929 of Bangladesh strictly prohibits early marriage, due to different socioeconomic and cultural factors, girls are often forced into early marriage.

Although marriage at an early age for girls had been in practice long before the British era, such practice became more common among Muslims and lower-caste Hindus in the mid-nineteenth century (Ahmed 1986). This view holds that child marriage can be regarded as a product of long-term cultural and traditional practice in Bangladesh. The patriarchal social structure, conservative social values, and extreme poverty have fostered this practice. Girls, who are widely misconceived as financial burdens on their families, receive less healthcare and

education since their birth. Amin (2008) noted that dowry works as another incentive for the parents to marry off their daughters at a younger age. Besides, female education (Bates 2007; Field and Ambrus 2008), the husband's occupation, the region of residence (urban or rural), the woman's work status and husband's education (Caldwell 2007), etc., are also suggested as crucial determinants of early marriage in developing countries.

Child marriage has a significant impact on society, including high population growth, increased health-related problems, and higher rates of women illiteracy (Field *et al.* 2008). Singh and Samara (1996) mentioned that the timing of the first marriage is an important factor in women's reproductive life. Maternal mortality is the principal cause of death among girls aged 15-19 worldwide (Verma *et al.* 2013). In addition, child marriage induces sexual exploitation and places a girl's health at risk (Maswikwa *et al.* 2015; Kamal 2012; Bates *et al.* 2007). Due to negative social and health-related consequences, marriage at an early age could be considered as an abuse of girls' human rights (UNICEF 2001). It involves a high risk of morbidity and mortality during pregnancy, labor, and delivery (Zabin and Kiragu 1998) as well as infant and child morbidity and mortality (Ikamari 2005).

Girls who get married at an early age face multifaceted biological, psychological and social problems. Often, they attain lower schooling, have lower social status in their husbands' families, report less reproductive control, domestic violence, and suffer malnutrition resulting in higher rates of maternal mortality and morbidity. These outcomes further suggest larger negative social consequences, including higher population growth, more rapid spread of disease, and a higher incidence of orphans (Field and Ambrus 2016; Dahl, 2010). Given the context, this study has been an attempt to examine the socioeconomic factors that determine the age at first marriage for Bangladeshi women with a view to developing effective intervention strategies.

## **2. Methods and Materials**

This study is a community based cross-sectional research work conducted at Koyra upazila (a small administrative unit) in Khulna District of Bangladesh. We selected Fakirpota, Kolpota, Angtihar and Binapani villages purposively from the Bagali and Dakshin Bedkashi union of Koyra upazila for this study. According to the latest census report carried out by the Government of Bangladesh (GoB), there live 92,709 females in Koyra upazila in Khulna district. A sample of 626 married women aged 18 or above was included in this study prior to data collection. The sample size was determined using the single population proportion formula by considering 50% of the women falling into the aforementioned age category (to obtain

maximum sample size) with 95% confidence interval. The respondents were selected by using the simple random sampling technique (lottery method without replacement) after a census had been conducted in the selected villages; 50 respondents could either not be reached or decided not to participate in this study. The response rate for this study was 92%.

We reviewed the relevant literature thoroughly for preparing the interview schedule used in this study. A total of 22 items including socioeconomic and early-marriage-related items were included in the interview schedule as we pre-tested it on 15 respondents before the final data collection. The data were collected primarily during the months of April and July 2017 by way of face-to-face interviews by trained research personnel. The collected data were edited and recoded for input in Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20 software. The data were analyzed later using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The dependent variable (marital age) was categorized as early (married below the age of 18) and late (married at 18 or above) married based on the respondents' age at first marriage. The bivariate analyses were performed using the chi-square test to explore possible associations between marital age and the selected covariates while binary logistic regression was considered to explore the marginal effects of independent variables.

We had gained both written and verbal consent of the participants before data collection. Strict standards of privacy protection were observed as all the participants were given pseudonyms and informed that none of them would be identified in any publications derived from the study. Participation in this study was voluntary, and the participants had freedom to withdraw from the interview at any time if they wished. We obtained the institutional approval to conduct the study from the Academic Committee of Sociology Discipline, Khulna University.

### **3. Results**

#### **3.1 Univariate Analysis**

Table 1 enumerates the percentile distribution of the socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents in Khulna district, Bangladesh. Among the total respondents (n=576), more than half (58.3% to be exact) were early married and the mean age at marriage was 16.8 years. Almost the same percentage of respondents (56.3%) were from extended families and the rest of 43.8% from nuclear families. A large portion (77.1%) of the respondents were Muslim, and the rest were from other religious communities. The highest of the occupations of the fathers of the respondents was farming (31.3%), followed by service, daily labor and business-related activities. The majority of the respondents remain in the bottom two categories of the household

income and the rest had an income of more than BDT one thousand. Most of the respondents were confined to primary and secondary education as these two categories make up two-thirds of the total distribution. The mean years of schooling for the respondents amounted to 4.3 years which means that they did not even complete the primary level of education.

**Table 1. Socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Frequency (n=576)</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Age</b>	18-27	294	51.0
	28-37	96	16.7
	38-47	72	12.5
	48 and above	114	19.8
<b>Marital Age</b>	Early(<18)	336	58.3
	Late (≥18)	240	41.7
<b>Religion</b>	Muslim	444	77.1
	Non-Muslim	132	22.9
<b>Education</b>	Illiterate (0)	108	18.8
	Primary(1-5)	216	37.5
	Secondary(6-10)	174	30.2
	Higher(11 and above)	78	13.5
<b>Family Type</b>	Extended	324	56.3
	Nuclear	252	43.8
<b>Father's Occupation</b>	Service	174	30.2
	Farmer	180	31.3
	Business	108	18.8
	Daily laborer	114	19.8
<b>Household Income</b>	≤5000 BDT	114	19.8
	5001-10000 BDT	294	51.0
	10001-15000 BDT	108	18.8
	≥15001 BDT	60	10.4

### **3.2 Bivariate Analysis**

Table 2 shows the association between socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents and early marriage through bivariate analysis. The results of chi-square tests show that respondents' age, religion, educational status, family type, father's occupation and household income were all significantly associated with their marital age ( $p < 0.001$ ). The bivariate results also reveal that the tendency of late marriage among the women aged between 38 and 47 and

48 or above was very low and the percentage stands at 7.5% for each while the late marriage tendency among women aged between 18 and 27 was much higher (60%). Early marriage tendency among Muslims was higher (85.7%) than Non-Muslims (14.3%). The women who passed the tertiary level of education albeit married earlier were at a much lower rate (7.1%). On the other hand, the women who had completed no (26.8%), primary (44.6%) and secondary (21.4%) levels of education scored a higher percentage of early marriage. Besides, women from extended families got married earlier and the percentage was higher (85.7%) than those who came from nuclear families (14.3%). Likewise, respondents whose fathers' occupation was farming and day labor had a higher rate of early marriage. This indicates that when household income is lower, early marriage tendency is higher whereas higher income levels trigger low rates of early marriage.

**Table 2. Cross-classification of early marriage by socioeconomic factors**

Variable	Marital Age		Chi-Square	<i>p</i> value
	Early	Late		
<b>Age</b>				
18-27	44.6%	60.0%	63.248	<0.001
28-37	10.7%	25.0%		
38-47	16.1%	7.5%		
48 and above	28.6%	7.5%		
<b>Religion</b>				
Islam	85.7%	65.0%	34.006	<0.001
Hindu	14.3%	35.0%		
<b>Education</b>				
Illiterate	26.8%	7.5%	83.703	<0.001
Primary	44.6%	27.5%		
Secondary	21.4%	42.5%		
Higher	7.1%	22.5%		
<b>Family Type</b>				
Extended	85.7%	15.0%	284.473	<0.001
Nuclear	14.3%	85.0%		
<b>Father's Occupation</b>				
Service	8.9%	60.0%	122.220	<0.001
Farmer	35.7%	25.0%		
Business	26.8%	7.5%		
Daily laborer	28.6%	7.5%		

<b>Household Income</b>				
≤5000 BDT	21.4%	17.5%		
5001-10000 BDT	66.1%	30.0%	185.203	<0.001
10001-15000 BDT	5.4%	37.5%		
≥15001 BDT	7.1%	15.0%		

### 3.3 Regression Analysis

Results from binary logistic regression represent the socioeconomic predictors of marital age of the respondents. It appears that all the selected predictors had a negative impact on the marital age of the respondents (Table 3). We found that the odds for late marriage among the women aged 28-37 was 4.279 in comparison to women aged 18-27, whereas the odds for the age range 38-47, and 48 and above were 0.090 and 0.617 respectively. The odds for late marriage among women who had no education and only completed primary education were 0.007 and 0.109 respectively in comparison to women who had higher levels of education in this study. This indicates that early marriage tendency among illiterate and low educated women, e.g., those who completed primary education only, was higher in comparison to the highly educated. Similarly, the odds for late marriage among Muslim women were 0.102 in comparison to Non-Muslim women implying a greater tendency of early marriage among Muslims than Non-Muslims. The odds for late marriage among women from nuclear families were 0.027 indicating a low incidence of early marriage among women from nuclear families. Alongside, the odds for respondents whose fathers were employers, day laborers and farmers were 0.207, 0.114 and 0.026 respectively in comparison to the respondents whose fathers' occupation was business. Household income was another potential predictor in determining the marital age of the respondents. Results show that the odds for late marriage among respondents whose household income level fell into the lower two categories were 0.012 and 0.27 for the third in comparison to respondents whose household income level fell into the highest category mentioned.

**Table 3. Binary Logistic Regression based parameter estimates of selected covariates to determine factors of Early Marriage**

Variable	Estimate	<i>p</i> value	AOR* (95% C.I)
<b>Age</b>			
18-27		-	1
28-37	1.454	0.002	4.279 (1.67, 10.97)

38-47	-2.411	0.019	0.090 (0.01, 0.68)
48 and above	-0.483	0.363	0.617 (0.22, 1.75)
<b>Religion</b>			
Muslim	-2.279	<0.001	0.102 (0.04, 0.28)
Non-Muslim		-	1
<b>Education</b>			
No education	-4.906	<0.001	0.007 (0.00, 0.05)
Primary	-2.217	0.002	0.109 (0.03, 0.44)
Secondary	-2.277	<0.001	0.062 (0.01, 0.29)
Higher		-	1
<b>Family Type</b>			
Nuclear	-3.628	<0.001	0.027 (0.01, 0.07)
Extended		-	1
<b>Father's Occupation</b>			
Business		-	1
Employee	-1.577	0.001	0.207 (0.08, 0.52)
Laborer	-4.245	<0.001	0.014 (0.00, 0.06)
Farmer	-3.631	<0.001	0.026 (0.01, 0.09)
<b>Household Income</b>			
≤5000 BDT	-4.440	<0.001	0.012 (0.00, 0.07)
5001-10000 BDT	-4.434	<0.001	0.012 (0.00, 0.06)
10001-15000 BDT	-1.279	0.143	0.276 (0.05, 1.55)
≥15001 BDT		-	1

\*Adjusted for some selected socio-demographic variables

#### 4. Discussion

Early marriage is a global concern as it adversely affects the physical and social life of millions of girls around the world. Despite the governmental efforts and intervention strategies, it still remains a major social problem in Bangladesh. Previous studies suggest that the prevalence of early marriage is significantly high in the country (Hossain *et al.* 2016; Ferdousi 2014; Kamal 2012). According to these studies, a deeper understanding of socioeconomic determinants influencing the marital age of women can navigate its way through evidence-based strategies and policies. To the best of our knowledge, the present study is one of the very first attempts to explore the scenario from south-western rural Bangladesh.

Many women in the developing world are forced to marry at an early age and most of them have little or no choice to make (Jense and Thronton 2010). Girls are married off soon after their teens because their parents want to be free from an economic burden and to secure the girls' sexual purity (UNICEF 2001). Adolescent brides are often preferred because of their virginity and obedience towards husbands. It is often believed that marrying off teenage girls protects the family's honor and tradition. Religion is a significant predictor for early marriage in this regard as we found in our study that Muslims women were married earlier in comparison to women from other religious groups. This corresponds with the findings of a Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) that found that about 92% of Muslim women get married before the age of eighteen in Bangladesh. Poverty is another factor that impacts negatively education prospects and in a low-income family, female children are treated as a burden and subsequently poverty is linked with the early marriage of the girl child in developing countries (Otoo-Oyortey and Pobi 2010). Findings of this study also corroborate the fact that there is a link between the father's occupation and household income and the marital age of the adolescent girls.

The present study was conducted in a rural area of Bangladesh, and therefore respondents with low levels of education were common. Most of the respondents had either primary or secondary education with one in five having no formal education. Results of bivariate analyses show that the low level of education had a significant association with early marriage in this study. This corresponds with literature findings that identify education as a significant predictor for determining marital age (Field and Ambrus 2008; Bates 2007) and the mortality rates (Deaton 2003). As a result, young women who marry early are more likely than their peers to experience high school dropout rates (Singh and Samara 1996). Girls after early marriage cannot continue their formal and even non-formal education because of their domestic burden (Mathur *et al.* 2003). This subsequently affects the health status of women because of low levels of knowledge and experience regarding health education (Harris and Cale 1997).

Early marriage has a profound socioeconomic, physical and intellectual impacts, cutting off opportunities of personal development. Women who marry at an early age tend to have less education and begin childrearing earlier and have less decision-making power in the household, being more likely to experience domestic violence (Otoo-Oyortey and Pobi, 2010). Physical, emotional and sexual abuses are more frequent among the women who married early (Clark *et al.* 2006). They are repeatedly exposed to violence and intimidation of abandonment and divorce (Chatha *et al.* 2014). The practice of forced early marriage stands in direct clash with the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by increasing poverty, maternal



mortality, infant health risk, HIV/AIDS rates and decreasing educational opportunities and women empowerment. This practice has a negative impact not only on the women but also on their children, family and society as a whole.

## 5. Conclusion

Early marriage contributes to a series of harmful consequences both for adolescent girls and the society in which they live. This study confirms that this social ordeal is linked with different socioeconomic factors like age, education, father's occupation, household income etc. Although this research has its own limitations as it has been conducted on a small scale and it considered the socioeconomic variables only, further extension of such studies is recommended to understand the cause-and-effect relationship between early marriage and the related factors. There may be certain other socio-structural, normative and customary practices in Bangladesh that also determine the marital age of women. As early marriage exerts both biological and social effects on women, hindering the national development, the issue needs proper attention.

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