

Consequences of early marriage on female schooling in rural Bangladesh

Marriage for women before age 18 is common in rural Bangladesh. This study aimed to assess the relationship between early marriage and duration of schooling for girls in rural Bangladesh. We obtained data from ongoing surveillance conducted by ICDDR,B in Abhoynagar. None of the sampled females who were married before age 18 attained 11 or more years of schooling, whereas, 23% of the females who married at age 25 or above completed 11 or more years of schooling. Women who married below age 19 were also less likely to work outside the home. These data suggest that delaying female marriage may increase female schooling attainment.

Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of child/adolescent marriage worldwide (1). In rural Bangladesh, parents encourage marriage of their daughters while they are still adolescents or children in hopes that this marriage will benefit them both financially and socially. Young girls are often regarded as an economic burden to their families; marrying them off at a very early age is seen as reducing the financial burden of the family (2). Parents encourage early marriage with a fear that their dowry price will increase as their daughter ages (3). It is also a way to ensure that their daughters are 'protected', as parents feel their daughters will be better off financially and safer from sexual abuse or illicit sexual contact than if they are married. Families with unmarried, older daughters are often stigmatized because they have not acted to 'protect' their family's honor by securing an early marriage.

Studies have demonstrated that girls who marry as adolescents attain lower schooling levels, have lower social status in their husband's families, report less reproductive control, and suffer higher rates of maternal mortality and domestic violence (3). Early marriage extends a woman's reproductive span, thereby contributing to large family size, especially in the absence of contraception. In addition, these individual outcomes suggest a number of larger social consequences, including higher population growth, higher rate of maternal mortality and a higher incidence of orphaned children (4). As a result of these patterns, early marriage is an issue of significant concern to policy makers and human rights advocates.

Social reformers in developing countries expressed their concern about early marriage early in the 20th century (4). The right to free and full consent to marriage was recognized in the 1948 Universal Declaration of

Human Rights and many subsequent human rights instruments. Proponents of age of consent laws argue that forcing parents to delay marriage will increase female schooling attainment and reproductive control, and decrease incidence of domestic violence. More recently, safe motherhood advocates have emphasized that adolescent pregnancies from early marriages constitute a major risk to the survival and future health of both mother and child (4).

This analysis aimed assess the relationship between early marriage and duration of schooling for girls in rural Bangladesh.

This study used data from ICDDR,B's Abhoynagar Surveillance System, which has been in operation in five unions in this sub-district in south-western Bangladesh since 1982. The primary objective of this surveillance system is to monitor population change over time. Structured interviews, which collect data on fertility, mortality, migration, contraception, vaccinations, marriage, occupation and education of household members, are administered every three months from every fourth household covering 34,000 individuals and 7,500 households.

The sample for this study consisted of all females in Abhoynagar surveillance area who were married in 2005 and 2006.

Background characteristics of the respondents

The 564 females in Abhoynagar surveillance area who married during 2005 and 2006 were not highly educated (Table 1). Over two thirds of the sample (69%) had 6-10 years of schooling. Around a quarter (27%) obtained education up to 0-5 years. Only 4% of females attended school for more than 11 years.

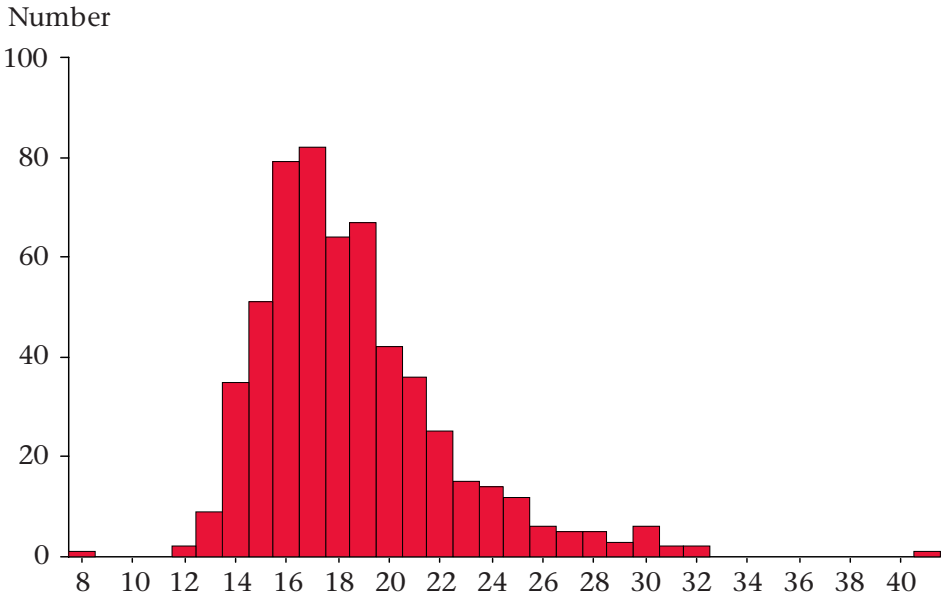
Seventeen percent of all of

Table 1: Socio-demomgraphic characteristics of girls who married in 2005 and 2006 in Abhoynagar

	N=564 n (%)
Education	
0-5 years	150 (27)
6-10 years	389 (69)
11 years and above	25 (4)
Age at marriage	
8-15 years	99 (17)
16-18 years	220 (39)
19-24 years	202 (36)
25 and above	43 (8)
Respondent works outside home	152 (27)
Education of respondent's mother	
no education	353 (63)
primary education	211 (37)
Education of respondent's father	
0-5 years	222 (39)
6-10 years	91 (16)
11 years and above	110 (20)
Unknown	141 (25)
Mother works outside home	82 (15)
Father works in agriculture	322 (57)

marriages in 2005 and 2006 were to girls under the age of 16 years including one child who was married at age eight. The median age of marriage was 18 years. Only 8% of marriages were to women 25 or more years of age (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Distribution of female's age at marriage, Abhoynagar, 2005-2006



The majority of married females did not participate in the labour force (Table 1). More than 60% of the mothers of these women had no education. None of the mothers had 11 or more years of education. Therefore, mothers were categorized only into two groups, mothers with no education and mothers with primary education. Thirty-nine percent of the fathers had ≤ 5 years of education. Twenty five percent of the fathers had informal education (categorized as 'unknown' in table 1). More than half of the fathers did not work outside the home.

Relation between early marriage and female schooling

Women who married at a younger age completed fewer years of formal education (Table 2). None of the females who married before age 19 years completed 11 or more years of education. On the contrary, 23% of the women who married at 25 or more years of age received at least 11 years of education. Seven percent of the women who were married between 19 and 24 years of age completed at least 11 years of schooling. Thirty nine

percent of girls who were married before 16 years of age completed <6 years of schooling, compared to only 14% among women who were married at over age 25 years.

We assessed whether the effect of age on educational achievement was independent of other factors associated with educational achievement including father's education, mother's education, and daughter's labour force participation using logistic regression. The median educational attainment in the study population was 8 years. We assessed risk factors for having <8 years of education using logistic regression. Age at marriage was a strong and independent predictor of educational attainment even when controlling for parental education and labor force participation (Table 3). Children married before age 15 were at increased risk of completing 8 or fewer years of education.

Not only education, but participation in labour force of the study population is also seen as key to female development (3). With this view, the relationship between early marriage and females' labour force participation was explored. Participation of women in labour force tends to be lower for those who had an early marriage. For exam-

Table 2: Relation between age at marriage and educational attainment of females, Abhoynagar 2005-2006

Age at marriage	Years of education		
	0-5 years	6-10 years	≥11 years
8-15 (n=99)	39%	61%	0%
16-18 (n=220)	29%	71%	0%
19-24 (n=202)	20%	73%	7%
≥25 (n=43)	14%	63%	23%
All (N=564)	27%	69%	4%

Table 3: Logistic regression odds for educational attainment of females married in Abhoynagar in 2005 and 2006

	Risk for ≥8 years of education Adjusted odds ratio (95% confidence interval)
Age at marriage	
8-15 years	28.0 (9.8-80)
16-18 years	4.6 (2.1-10)
19-24 years	1.3 (.59-2.9)
25 and above*	0.0
Labour force participation	
not in labour force	2.6 (1.6-4.1)
in labour force*	0.0
Education of mother	
no education	3.3 (2.1-5.1)
primary education*	0.0
Education of father	
0-5 years	2.4 (1.5-3.7)
>5 years*	0.0

*Comparison group

ple, 25% and 26% of the girls in the sample who married during age 8-15 and 16-18 years, participated in the labour force, compared to 47% of those who married at ≥ 25 years of age.

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Comment

In this rural community in Bangladesh 17% of all marriages are to girls who are under the age of 16 years. During the past decade, the movement for 'Education for All' has stressed the need to enrol more girls in school and to keep them from dropping out before completion of their education. In this context, the custom of early marriage is acknowledged as one of the reasons for girl's drop-out from school, especially, in cultural settings where girls are raised for a lifetime confined to household occupations and are expected to marry very young (5). Our analysis also shows, girls in rural Bangladesh who marry at very young ages attain less schooling. This study did not follow the girls after marriage in order to measure their final educational attainment, though other research suggests that rural Bangladeshi girls do not continue education after marriage (6). We also do not know whether or not girls were enrolled in school before they married. However, this analysis supports the idea that delaying female marriage may increase female schooling attainment.

According to the Child Marriage Restraint Act, the minimum legal age at marriage is 18 years for females in Bangladesh. Even partial enforcement of 18 as the minimum age at marriage in Bangladesh, could have a positive effect on schooling. In Bangladesh, prosecutions of lawbreakers, parents or spouses, is uncommon. One difficulty in application of the age of consent law is that in rural Bangladesh most marriages are unregistered (6). The situation is exacerbated by the fact that birth registration is so irregular that age at marriage may not be known. Laws should be enforced to discourage early marriage; however, legal actors alone are insufficient. Social programmes may also be effective in deterring early marriage.

Poverty is one of the most frequently cited factors behind child and adolescent marriage in rural Bangladesh. Therefore, programmes aimed at poverty alleviation can incorporate disincentives for families to marry

Table 4: Relationship between early marriage and labour force participation of females married in Abhoynagar in 2005 and 2006

Age at marriage	In labour force n (%)
8-15 (n=99)	25 (25)
16-18 (n=220)	57 (26)
19-24 (n=202)	50 (25)
≥ 25 (n=42)	20 (47)
All (N=564)	152 (27)

their daughters off at a young age. For example, a micro-finance programme in India excludes parents who marry off their daughters before age 19 (6). Such innovative strategies might also be effective for Bangladesh. All available tools should be used to create an environment where girls can wait until they are ready for marriage.

References

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Surveillance update

With each issue of the HSB, updates of surveillance data described in earlier issues are provided. These updated tables and figures represent the most recent observation period available at the time of publication. We hope these updates will be helpful to health professionals who are interested in current patterns of disease and drug resistance.

Proportion of diarrhoeal pathogens susceptible to antimicrobial drugs: December 2006-November 2007

Antimicrobial agents	<i>Shigella</i> (n=179)	<i>V. cholerae</i> O1 (n=721)
Nalidixic acid	22.0	Not tested
Mecillinam	94.4	Not tested
Ampicillin	57.5	Not tested
TMP-SMX	33.5	0.0
Ciprofloxacin	96.6	100.0
Tetracycline	Not tested	48.8
Erythromycin	Not tested	10.5
Furazolidine	Not tested	0.0