

Fading Futures: Understanding the Connection of Early Marriage, Child Rights Violations, and Abusive Behaviors

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Abstract

This research explores into the complex ties among early marriage, child rights violations, and abusive behaviors, shedding light on its global implications. Through an exploration in Bogura's Khatiamari village, it uncovers a web of socio-political, cultural, and economic factors behind this issue. The study's objectives encompass investigating the factors behind early marriage's prevalence, understanding the types of child rights violations associated with it, and identifying the short-term and long-term consequences of these violations. Qualitative research methods, including case studies, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions, were employed to gather insights from the community. The findings emphasize that early marriage is deeply rooted in poverty and economic insecurity, often forcing families into decisions driven by desperation. This practice results in a range of child rights violations, including disrupted education, compromised health, diminished agency, and exposure to abusive behaviors. The emotional and psychological toll on children, particularly girls, is significant, as they are denied the opportunity to grow, develop, and participate fully in society. The study underscores the urgent need for multi-dimensional solutions. It calls for strengthening legal frameworks, awareness campaigns, and community engagement to challenge harmful norms and ensure child rights protection. Gender equality emerges as a pivotal element in addressing this issue comprehensively. The study calls for united action by governments, organizations, families, and individuals to end early marriage. This empowers children to reach their potential, free from tradition and discrimination. Despite challenges, this path offers hope to reshape societies, nurture dreams, and uphold every child's rights.

Keywords: Child marriage, Child rights

Introduction:

Early marriage remains a pressing concern across the globe, with severe implications for child rights violations and the perpetuation of abusive behaviors. The research aims to explore into the intricate relationship between early marriage, violations of child rights, and the perpetuation of abusive behaviors. By understanding these connections, the study seeks to contribute to policy formulation, intervention strategies, and public awareness campaigns that effectively address these intertwined issues.

Child marriage, which involves marrying children under the age of 18, is widely condemned in international human rights agreements due to its harmful and discriminatory nature (www.equalitynow.org). This practice is problematic for various reasons, as outlined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) in Article 16, which emphasizes the importance of both partners' consent in marriage. Both men and women of legal age, regardless of race, nationality, or religion, have the right to marry and establish a family, with equal rights during and after marriage. Child marriages frequently occur without the genuine capacity for meaningful consent, resembling forced marriages in which authentic agreement is either absent or considered irrelevant (www.humanists.international.org). The Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age (1964), underscores the significance of obtaining complete and voluntary consent from both individuals, with this consent being openly declared and witnessed by appropriate authorities (www.ohchr.org).

Child marriages have adverse consequences on the development of both girls and boys, hindering their potential (Jensen and Thornton, 2003). These marriages, especially prevalent among girls, perpetuate gender discrimination and deprive children of their rights. Early marriages disrupt education, expose children to violence and abuse, and limit their participation in society (Loaiza and Wong, 2012), thus violating Article 15 and 29 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) (www.un.org).

Early marriage not only undermines children's rights but also poses a threat to their future. It often leads to early pregnancies, health risks, and maternal mortality (www.plan-international.org). This cycle of negative impacts and gender inequalities continues across generations (Jensen and Thornton, 2003), hampering economic development (Vogelstein, 2013).

Recognizing child marriage as a violation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Unicef, 2005), various stakeholders have called for legislative measures to prevent child marriage and close legal gaps that permit marriages under 18 (Human Rights Watch, 2001).

Child marriage persists as a violation of human rights, robbing millions of children worldwide of their childhood (www.plan-international.org). Despite being internationally prohibited, concerted efforts are needed to eradicate this harmful practice and ensure the well-being and rights of all children.

The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2017 (CMRA) addresses the issue of child marriage in Bangladesh. Enacted in February 2017, this law replaced the previous legislation from 1929. The CMRA establishes the minimum marriage age as 21 years for males and 18 years for females. Those who violate this regulation are subject to penalties. Despite a gradual decrease over the past three decades, child marriage remains prevalent, particularly in Bangladesh.

According to UNICEF, over 50 percent of Bangladeshi women currently in their mid-20s were married before reaching the age of 18. Significant portions, around 16 percent, were married under the age of 15. Child marriage reflects deeply entrenched societal norms and the unequal status of women, often stemming from the perception of women as financial liabilities. While poverty and low literacy rates contribute to the problem, evidence shows that child marriage occurs across all socioeconomic backgrounds and in both urban and rural areas of Bangladesh [www.unicef.org/bangladesh].

The vulnerability of girls to child marriage is further amplified in rural parts of Bangladesh, where the added threat of climate change-induced natural disasters exacerbates the issue. Nonetheless, in Bangladesh, the prevailing perspective does not consider child marriage as a manifestation of sexual abuse. Consequently, adolescent girls who enter early marriages face an elevated likelihood of early pregnancies and associated health hazards.

These societal rules, norms, or values ultimately come at the expense of hindering the growth, safeguarding, and engagement of children, particularly girls. This study aims to uncover societies marked by elevated child marriage rates and discern the sorts of repercussions that impede developmental progress.

Objectives:

The study's objectives encompass investigating the factors behind early marriage's prevalence, understanding the types of child rights violations associated with it, and identifying the short-term and long-term consequences of these violations. The primary objectives of this research are as follows:

- a. To investigate the factors contributing to early marriage and its prevalence in the study community.
- b. To identify the types of child rights violations associated with early marriage and their short-term and long-term consequences.

Methods:

Qualitative research methods were employed in this study to understand the connection of early marriage, child rights violations, and abusive behaviors in Khatiamari village, located in Bogura. The selection of Khatiamari was driven by its noteworthy high child marriage rate, which presents a captivating and significant societal phenomenon warranting investigation. The study encompassed 283 households within the chosen area.

To unravel the motivations behind child marriage within this specific locale, 20 case studies (comprising 15 females and 5 males) were conducted within the community. These case studies delved into individuals who had undergone early marriages. Additionally, in-depth interviews were carried out with family members of these individuals. These interviews followed a semi-structured approach, allowing for open-ended responses and enabling participants to share their unique viewpoints, personal experiences, and insights related to the subject.

Furthermore, focus group discussions (FGDs) were organized involving community members, specifically representing diverse age groups and genders. These FGDs fostered interactive dialogues that unveiled prevailing beliefs and cultural norms within the community regarding early marriages and divorce. Through these combined research methods, a comprehensive understanding of the complex factors contributing to early marriages and divorces in the community was attained.

Factors contributing to early marriage:

In the context of this study area, the decision to arrange early marriages for children has been profoundly influenced by a complex interplay of socio-political and cultural factors. Among these factors, one of the prominent drivers compelling parents to enforce early marriages is the looming specter of poverty and economic insecurity. Families facing financial hardships often perceive early marriage as a potential

remedy to alleviate their economic burdens, viewing it as a pathway towards securing financial stability for their daughters. This perspective is rooted in the belief that the responsibility for their well-being will shift to the husband's family, thus relieving the parents of their current financial struggles.

This connection between poverty and early marriage is particularly conspicuous in underprivileged families, where limited economic opportunities cast a harsh reality of deprivation and struggle. In these marginalized areas, the lack of accessible and quality education leaves many young girls with distant aspirations and perpetuates a cycle of poverty. Scarce job prospects and inadequate resources further tighten the grip on families, compelling them to make heartrending decisions regarding their daughters' future.

Trapped in the clutches of destitution and desperation, families perceive early marriage as a desperate coping mechanism to alleviate their financial woes. Tragically, this choice exacts a steep toll, robbing young girls of their childhood, exposing them to myriad health risks, emotional trauma, and a lifetime of missed opportunities. Early marriage thus becomes a catalyst for ongoing inequality, thwarting progress and development within these marginalized communities.

According to the respondents to break this cycle, targeted interventions are imperative. Investment in education, vocational training, and sustainable livelihood programs holds the potential to uplift the communities from the clutches of poverty. Additionally, dismantling regressive beliefs through community engagement and empowering women can dismantle the practice of early marriage. Such endeavors pave the way for progress and prosperity, fostering a future where every individual can realize their potential and contribute to the betterment of society – a sentiment echoed by participants in our focus group discussions.

Child rights and causes neglect and abusive behavior to children:

Right to Education: The issue of early marriage significantly makes vulnerable the fundamental right to education, particularly for girls, ultimately leading to a cascade of negative consequences. This practice forces young girls to prematurely abandon their education in order to take on marital and domestic duties. This interruption in their educational journey has far-reaching implications that extend beyond the individual, affecting communities, societies, and economies at large.

In the study area early marriage, often driven by cultural norms, economic pressures, and traditional beliefs, disrupts the trajectory of a girl's education. As they are compelled to assume roles as wives and caretakers at an age when they should be focusing on learning and personal growth, their potential for academic and intellectual development is stifled. This limitation of educational opportunities perpetuates a cycle of gender inequality, reinforcing the deeply entrenched societal norms that place a lesser value on the education and empowerment of women.

The lack of education among the respondents resulting from early marriage confines young brides to a narrow set of roles and responsibilities, limiting their potential for personal advancement and contribution to society. As a result, they are often locked into a cycle of poverty and dependency, unable to access meaningful employment or pursue higher aspirations. This not only stifles their individual dreams but also hampers societal progress as a whole.

Right to Health: The right to health is a fundamental human entitlement that should be upheld for every individual, regardless of their age or gender mentioned by a young respondent. However, the distressing practices of early marriage, particularly when it involves young girls, places their health and well-being

in crucial risk. The complications of early marriage on the health of these vulnerable children are profound and encompass a range of awful consequences, spanning from maternal health to child well-being mentioned by a victim's parents.

One of the most concerning aspects of early marriage in the study area is its association with early pregnancy. Young girls who are married off at a tender age are at an elevated risk of becoming pregnant before their bodies are fully developed. This premature pregnancy carries substantial health hazards, as their bodies may not be prepared to handle the physical and emotional demands of childbirth. The occurrence of complications during childbirth is substantially higher among adolescent mothers, with increased risks of maternal mortality, stillbirths, and neonatal deaths. Such types of cases are common the study area.

The study also found that health hazards do not end with childbirth. Early pregnancy and childbirth often lead to adverse health outcomes for both the young mother and her child. Adolescents are more likely to experience complications such as anemia, high blood pressure, and preterm birth, which can have lifelong implications for the health and well-being of both mother and child. The cycle of poor health can perpetuate across generations, as these young mothers may not possess the physical, emotional, and socioeconomic resources to provide adequate care for their children.

The lack of access to comprehensive healthcare and reproductive health services further exacerbates these health risks. Young girls who are married off early often face barriers to seeking medical care due to their limited autonomy and social circumstances. They might lack the information, resources, and agency to make informed decisions about their reproductive health, leading to a heightened vulnerability to infections, complications, and a lack of proper prenatal care.

Right to Protection: The study found that the right to protection is a cornerstone of human rights, ensuring that individuals, particularly the most vulnerable, are shielded from harm and abuse. Tragically, child marriage stands as a violation of this right, thrusting children, especially young girls, into a nightmarish landscape of abuse and exploitation that spans physical, sexual, and emotional dimensions. The consequences of child marriage reverberate far beyond the confines of marriage itself, perpetuating cycles of suffering that demand urgent intervention and systemic change.

Child marriage, by its very nature, exposes young brides to an elevated risk of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse in the study area. These girls are often married off to older partners, leaving them inherently unequal in terms of power dynamics within the relationship. The lack of agency and voice makes them vulnerable to domestic violence, as their young age and marital status render them susceptible to maltreatment, control, and even coercion. Disturbingly, the concept of consent may be absent from these unions, and marital rape can become a harrowing reality.

Exploitation takes on uncountable forms within the study context of child marriage. Young brides are frequently subjected to forced labor and servitude within their marital homes. Denied the opportunity to pursue education or meaningful employment, they become trapped in a cycle of dependency, where their contributions are taken for granted and their potential suppressed. This servitude extends to the reproductive realm, where they may be compelled to bear children at an early age, regardless of their own health and well-being.

Child marriage serves as a breeding ground for human trafficking and sexual exploitation. One of the participants shared that their in-laws' family was contemplating engagement in the realm of prostitution. The vulnerability of young brides, coupled with their limited social networks and isolation, renders them

susceptible to being manipulated and coerced into various forms of trafficking, including sexual exploitation and forced labor. These girls become victims of a vicious cycle, trapped within systems that prey on their innocence and lack of autonomy.

Right to Freedom from Discrimination: The issue of child marriage stands as a formidable barrier to the realization of the fundamental right to freedom from discrimination among the respondents. This practice, deeply rooted in antiquated gender norms, not only perpetuates an environment of inequality but also stifles the prospects of countless children, predominantly girls, from embracing their full rights and unlocking their innate potential.

In the study area child marriage, by its very nature, becomes an agent of reinforcement for harmful gender stereotypes. It drives young girls into a role where they are forced to bear the weight of tradition, shackling them to domestic roles and responsibilities while effectively curbing their aspirations and ambitions. This regressive practice actively denies them the opportunity to receive education, pursue their dreams, and contribute meaningfully to society.

At its core, child marriage serves as a catalyst for the maintenance of unequal power dynamics. It engenders a vicious cycle where girls are stripped of their autonomy, effectively normalizing the dominance of males in decision-making processes. This perpetuates a pattern where women's voices are marginalized and their agency is suppressed, feeding into broader social structures that prioritize male control over female autonomy found in the study area.

The teacher of the study area mentioned that the struggle against child marriage is not just a fight for individual rights; it's a battle for equality, justice, and human dignity. Only through collective efforts to challenge and change these entrenched norms can we truly emancipate children from the grip of discriminatory practices and forge a path toward a more inclusive, equitable, and harmonious world.

Right to Participation: In the study area this practice egregiously denies children, particularly young girls, and the agency to be active participants in decisions that intimately shape their lives. Instead, they are coerced into a trajectory marred by a lack of consent, their voices stifled, and their aspirations subjugated.

In the study area early marriage fundamentally disempowers children, leaving them devoid of a voice in pivotal life-altering decisions. Their lack of consent transforms a potential opportunity for self-determination and empowerment into a distressing ordeal characterized by vulnerability. Refusing children the chance to engage in perhaps the most crucial decision of their existence deprives them of their intrinsic rights, relegating them to a passive state of submission.

This grave injustice ripples through other realms of their lives, relegating their education, health, and overall well-being to the periphery of consideration. Their educational aspirations, dreams of pursuing careers, and hopes for personal growth are squandered under the weight of societal pressures. Denied the agency to shape their own destinies, they are left marginalized, their potential shackled by outdated traditions that perpetuate inequality.

Moreover, the dismissal of their voices perpetuates a cycle of gender-based discrimination, reinforcing the erroneous notion that their perspectives hold lesser value. This disregard for their opinions not only undermines their autonomy but also erodes their confidence in advocating for themselves and asserting their rights. Such marginalization stifles their ability to contribute to society's progress, casting a shadow on the collective potential of an entire generation.

Emotional and Psychological Consequences: The haunting specter of early marriage casts a long and dark shadow over the emotional and psychological well-being of children, leaving in its wake a trail of profound distress and anguish. This practice, laden with the weight of premature responsibility, has the potential to inflict deep-seated emotional scars that resonate far beyond the confines of childhood, manifesting as stress, anxiety, depression, and a profound sense of isolation.

The toll of early marriage on a child's mental and emotional landscape is staggering. Stripped prematurely of the innocence and carefree spirit that define childhood, these young souls are thrust into the daunting realm of adulthood without the requisite emotional preparedness. The weight of adult responsibilities that they are ill-equipped to bear becomes an overwhelming burden, fragmenting their sense of self and subjecting them to a ceaseless cycle of apprehension and trepidation.

The loss of their rightful childhood deprives them of the chance to nurture meaningful connections and foster vital social support networks. Isolated from peers and the companionship that nurtures emotional resilience, they stand at the precipice of loneliness, grappling with emotions that lack an outlet for expression. The stark contrast between their age and the demands imposed upon them magnifies their sense of vulnerability, fostering an environment ripe for emotional neglect.

Moreover, the study found undue exposure to the intricate complexities of adult relationships and responsibilities exposes them to realities they are not developmentally equipped to navigate. This exposure can engender feelings of inadequacy, fostering a belief that their emotional needs are secondary to the demands placed upon them. As a result, the seeds of mental health issues are sown, with conditions like anxiety and depression taking root and flourishing in the fertile soil of isolation and emotional strain.

Interference with Personal Development: The insidious clutches of child marriage reverberate across the spectrum of personal development, stifling the potential of children and binding them to the chains of tradition. This deeply entrenched practice robs them of the invaluable chance to hone their skills, nurture their talents, and explore their interests. In its place, it imposes constricting gender roles, impeding access to education, quashing aspirations, and relegating personal growth to the periphery. This tragic cycle, perpetuated by child marriage, engenders a vicious nexus of stunted development, poverty, and dependency.

The repercussions of child marriage are nothing short of a derailment of human potential. These young souls, bound by the confines of oppressive norms, are stripped of the autonomy to embrace their uniqueness and harness their latent talents. Instead, they are ensnared in a web of predetermined gender roles that frustrate their aspirations, locking them into prescribed paths that curtail their ability to flourish as individuals.

The deprivation of education, a cardinal cornerstone of personal growth, becomes an inescapable reality for many child brides. Denied access to knowledge and intellectual exploration, their potential to contribute to society is strangled at the very roots. The absence of education serves as a direct conduit to the perpetuation of cycles of poverty, leaving them bereft of the tools needed to uplift themselves and their communities.

The cycle of disempowerment is further compounded by the lack of control over respondents' own lives. With aspirations extinguished, dreams deferred, and independence stripped away, these children often find themselves trapped in a cycle of dependency on others, perpetuating the

Conclusion:

The unavoidable complexities of early marriage intertwine with violations of child rights, emotional suffering, and the stifling of personal development. This web of issues poses a profound challenge to human progress, equality, and the well-being of countless children, particularly girls, worldwide. As the study reflects on the gravity of this interconnected struggle, it becomes apparent that tackling one facet without addressing the others would be an exercise in futility.

The study shared, the voices heard, and the stark realities exposed by the respondents underscore the urgent need for collective action. Governments, organizations, communities, families, and individuals must stand as a united force against the tendrils of early marriage that reach into the lives of vulnerable children. Policies and laws must be fortified to safeguard child rights and empower girls to fulfill their potential, free from the shackles of oppressive norms.

Awareness campaigns are vital in dismantling the misconceptions that fuel early marriage. By unraveling the intricate web of factors that contribute to this practice, society can shift its focus from perpetuating outdated traditions to nurturing the talents, dreams, and aspirations of its youth.

Moreover, the importance of gender equality in this equation cannot be overstated. By upholding the rights of all children, regardless of their gender, findings pave a path to a more equitable future where each individual's potential can thrive unhindered. Involvement from religious leaders, community members, and families is crucial in reshaping the collective consciousness, challenging harmful norms, and fostering environments where children can truly participate, develop, and lead fulfilling lives.

The road ahead is one of challenges, but it is also paved with the potential to reshape destinies and redefine societies. Need to be uniting government and nongovernment organizations commitment to dismantle the chains of early marriage, to safeguard child rights, and to ensure that every child, every girl, and every young soul is granted the opportunity to grow, to learn, and to rise to their fullest potential. Through sustained efforts, informed policies, and unwavering dedication, to illuminate the path toward a future where children are protected, dreams are nurtured, and the intrinsic rights of every individual are honored, respected, and upheld.

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