

Girls not Brides: Concern of Distance Learning: Strategies to Prevent Child Marriage and Curse of Dowry: Bangladesh Perspective

Abstract:

Women's access to education must be treated as their fundamental right. And it is only through education that they would get the chance to prepare themselves in order to play their roles in nation's social, economic and political spheres as equal members of society. In Bangladesh, very few women can enjoy such rights and live a healthy and prestigious life. At present due to government initiatives, girl's enrolment in primary and secondary education is little bit higher than the boys. Despite of such encouraging scenario, there is a dark side behind this. Due to prejudice, mistaken education from family and society, lack of security, dropout rate of girls is higher and their retention rate is low. Marriage is considered as the alternative to education, which ultimately leads to violence against women due to unpaid dowry. Bangladesh has the second-highest rate of child marriage in the world, behind Niger, and the highest rate of marriage of girls under age 15, according to a 2014 report by UNICEF. As a teaching and learning delivery model there is no option of distance education to meet up the challenges of inclusion girls with technological strength. The Open and Distance Learning system with its inherent nature of flexibilities has the potential to reach the unreached. It can provide an appropriate methodology to meet up the skilling needs of the unreached community through its academic, vocational, technical, professional, extension and lifelong learning programs. The article analyze the issues of child marriage, which gives the indication of the real causes of child marriage. The paper examines various strategies to minimize child marriage within a distance learning framework, underscoring the crucial role of diversity in culture and socio-economic status.

Introduction:

Women's access to education must be treated as their fundamental right. And it is only through education that they would get the chance to prepare themselves in order to play their roles in nation's social, economic and political spheres as equal members of society. In Bangladesh, very few women can enjoy such rights and live a healthy and prestigious life. At present due to government initiatives, girl's enrolment in primary and secondary education is little bit higher than the boys. Despite of such encouraging scenario, there is a dark side behind this. Due to prejudice, mistaken education from family and society, lack of security, dropout rate of girls is higher and their retention rate is low. Marriage is considered as the alternative to education, which ultimately leads to violence against women due to unpaid dowry. Child brides are at greater risk of experiencing a range of poor health outcomes, having children at younger ages when they are not yet ready to do so, dropping out of school, earning less over their lifetimes and living in poverty compared to their peers who marry at later ages. Child brides may also be more likely to experience intimate partner violence, have restricted physical mobility, and limited decision-making ability. Most fundamentally, child brides may be disempowered in ways that deprive them of their basic rights to health, education and safety. These dynamics affect not only the girls themselves, but also their children and households, as well as communities and entire societies. Child marriage is widely considered as a violation of human rights and a form of violence against girls. The elimination of child marriage by 2030 is a target under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Yet investments to end the practice are limited, and worldwide the incidence of child marriage has been declining too slowly over time to achieve the SDG

The Barriers Girls Face in Bangladesh

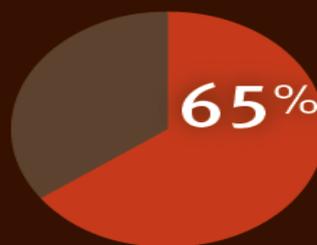
Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of child marriage worldwide and the highest rate of marriage involving girls under 15 years of age (UNICEF 2014). 65 per cent of girls are married by 18 years of age, and 29 per cent by 15 years of age. Currently, the minimum legal age for marriage is 18 for women and 21 for men – as stated in the Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929. However, in Bangladesh, this is poorly enforced and the punishment of either imprisonment of up to one month and/or a fine up to 1,000 Taka (US\$13) rarely acts as a deterrent (Human Rights Watch 2013). Women and girls face discrimination and exclusion and have negligible influence in the family's decision-making processes. Girls are often considered a burden, especially for poor households, where they are at risk of marriage at an early age, and where the practice of dowries is burdensome.

CHILD MARRIAGE IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh has the **fourth-highest** rate of child marriage in the world, according to UNICEF. Between 2005–2013,



of girls married
before the age of **15**.



of girls married
before the age of **18**.

Source: UNICEF, "State of the World's Children 2015: Executive Summary," November 2014.

Objectives:

- Why Gender Gap persisting in Mainstream Education
- What are the root causes of child marriage?
- How mistaken family education play as an important agent for changing the attitude of the society
- Why National and International convention partially successful in combating child marriage
- How education can be the vehicle to lessen child marriage in Bangladesh
- Whether Open and Distance Learning as an alternative approach can take the social responsibility to minimize child marriage
- What will be the strategies of Open and Distance Learning to interfere in child marriage
- What are Challenges

Methodology:

The article is based on literature review. Newspaper clippings from several national dailies have been taken into account in analyzing the grave impact of child marriage in Bangladesh. Both qualitative and quantitative methodology have been used in this article. Data were collected using a qualitative and quantitative data. Questionnaires (a combination of open-ended and coded) were distributed to over 30 female students enrolled in secondary education in BOU, they were the victim of early marriage. After facing a struggle life financially, physically, mentally and socially they were able to break the cage and took admission to BOU, thrives for empowerment. The secondary data were collected from articles and publications.

Primary Data Analysis

Table: 1 Respondents According to Age:

Size	Frequency	Percentage
16-20	37	37 %
20-22	33	33 %

22-25	12	12 %
25-30	10	10 %
30 above	08	08%
Total	100	100%

Causes of Dropout of the Girls from formal Schooling

Respondents	Causes	Frequency	Percentage
16-20	Poverty		20%
20-22	Early Marriage		25%
22-25	Religion		5%
30 above	Social Insecurity		33%
Total	Others		175
		100	100

Reasons for low female enrolment in secondary education are well documented (dropping out of formal schooling and a variety of reasons were given). The most common reasons in our study included poverty 20%; early marriage 25%, religion 5%, social security 33%, and other cause 17% for dropout from formal schooling.

Secondary Data Analysis:

The Despair to Hope

A girl named Tahera, she is now 27. She got married when she was only 16 years old. Tahera living in a slum at Chankharpul, in the old part of Dhaka After two years of marriage her husband went to Middle East for job. After going few months he did not keep the relation and communication with Tahera. After five or six years she came to know that her husband died in road accident. Tahera was so respondents are the victim of child marriage and after a long break they have enrolled in BOU. She became pregnant just after her marriage; her son is now 10 years old. She was a regular victim of “eve teasing” (verbal sexual abuse) on her way to school .This is such a load of bullshit when she got on the bus. Therefore her brothers thought that she should stay in the house and get married. One of her brother passed Higher Secondary School Certificate program from Bangladesh Open University, so he encouraged her sister to get admit in the HSC program of Bangladesh Open University. Tahera got admitted at the BOU and passed HSC exam successfully. After that she got a job in Madrasa (Religious school. Degree of BOU gives her strong feeling to decide about her future and enhance her social prestige and value to her family.

Case Study: A story of two girls overcoming the odds of child marriage in Bangladesh where 65% of women aged 20-24 were first married by the age of 18. (Video Clips)

Gender gap persisting in mainstreaming education in Bangladesh

If girl’s education is so beneficial why does the gender gap in education still persist in Bangladesh? Poverty, early marriage, cultural norms, and religious orthodoxy are the major challenges to female education. The Government of Bangladesh and its people understand the value of an educated population Bangladesh Government has already reached to its target in increasing the enrolment rate of girls.

Table: 1 Gross and Net Enrolment Rate in Primary Education

Year	GER(%)		NER(%)	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
2010	103.2	112.4	92.2	97.6
2011	97.5	105.6	92.7	97.3
2012	101.3	107.6	95.4	98.1
2013	106.8	110.5	96.2	98.4
2014	104.6	112.3	96.6	98.8
2015	105.0	113.4	97.1	98.8
Source: BANBEIS Report 2015				

From 2010 to 2015, the gross enrolment rate of girls was higher than boys. However, for girls the enrolment rate increased from 112.4 percent to 113.4 percent over the mentioned period. On the other hand, for boys it increased from 103.2 percent to 105.0 percent from 2010 to 2015.

Table: 2 Dropout rate in Primary Education 2012 – 2015

Years	Girls	Boys
2012	24.20	28.30
2013	17.90	24.90
2014	17.50	24.30
2015	17.00	23.90
Source: Compiled data from BANBEIS		

The overall dropout rate for both boys and girls has decreased significantly over the time. From 2012 to 2015, the boys' dropout rate is higher than girls. In 2012, the girls' and boys' dropout rate was 24.20 percent and 28.30 percent and it got down to 17.00 percent and 23.90 percent in 2015 respectively. As in 2015, still the dropout rate of girls and boys was very high we need to focus on for why it is happening and where they are going after dropping out. There is no available data regarding the reason for dropout of total number of students but in the Child labor survey report 2013 the following reasons were identified.

Table: 3 Reasons for dropout from primary education population aged 6-11, 2013 (Percent)

Reasons	Female	Male
Failed Examination	7	7
Not Interested	25	43
To start working	5	11
To get married	12	0
To support family income	8	17
Parents did not want	10	3
No school nearby	2	1
Could not afford	30	18
others	2	1
Source: Child Labor Survey 2013		

It's very wondering that most of the dropout were happened either due to financial problem or not interested for having education. The first reason of dropout for girls was financial problem and for boys due to disinterest. There are various reason for dropout of the children from primary education. This paper focuses on the child marriage as an important factor for drop out because it is related to the major causes that is financial problems too. Girls are often considered as a burden of a family and late marriage demands more dowry.

Root causes of Child Marriage

Child marriage is generally driven by the mind-set of gender inequality persistent in the society. The main causes of the child marriage considered by the society are:

Poverty: The median age of marriage for girls living in the poorest households of Bangladesh is 15, compared to 18 for those living in the richest households .Dowry prices typically increase as girls get older and less attractive compare to younger girls who are much more lucrative.

Level of Education: The median age of marriage for Bangladeshi girls who have no education is 15, compared to 20 for those who have completed secondary school or higher. Empirical study shows that skill development and livelihood can reduce child marriage up to one third in Bangladesh. Girls increase their knowledge about their health and social rights and the negative consequences of child marriage , gain skills that are locally relevant and validated by the labor market and have aspirations for employment (Outcome 3 of the Report (Source: Girl Inspire, COL)

Family Honor: High value is placed on the virginity of girls in Bangladesh and child marriage is the result of the pre-mind-set of the society. The 2013 national Study shows that fathers are most often responsible for deciding when and who to marry their daughter.

Natural Disaster; Natural disaster often accelerate child marriage. Frequent flooding means many families live in insecure situation which provoke them to give marry their daughter as a safeguard.

Girls are lagging behind because of Mistaken Family Education

In Bangladesh, a patriarchal, unequal society prevails. On top of this, poverty is a major underpinning factor encouraging early marriage. The liberal feminists believe that traditional social institutions like family trained girls in a way that they became an integral part of male persons' identity. From the early life of childhood, girl learns to be submissive, to be emotional and to take interest in personal and family affairs, whereas the boy learns to be competitive, unemotional and outward-looking. The above-mentioned roles for male and female were socially created which ultimately become the permanent structure of a society. In this connection, it can be mentioned Simone de Beauvoir's famous phrase, "One is not born but rather becomes a woman."¹¹ There is a common belief that environment determines women's character. Mill discarded the view by giving priority to education. He believed that by receiving mistaken education, women are holding unequal position in society.

National convention for Combating Child Marriage

Bangladesh's Child Marriage Restraint Act

- Bangladesh has committed to eliminate child, early marriage by 2030 in line with target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals. During its Voluntary National Review at the 2017 High Level Political Forum, the government noted that women's empowerment plays a prominent role in the Constitution of Bangladesh, the National Women Development Policy and the Child Marriage Restraint Act.
- Bangladesh ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990 which sets a minimum age of marriage of 18, and acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1984, which obligates states to ensure free and full consent to marriage.
- Bangladesh is a focus country of the UNICEF-UNFPA Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage, a multi-donor, multi-stakeholder programme working across 12 countries over four years.
- Bangladesh is a member of the South Asian Initiative to End Violence against Children (SAIEVAC) which adopted a regional action plan to end child marriage from 2015-2018.
- Representatives of the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), including Bangladesh, asserted the Kathmandu Call to Action to End Child Marriage in Asia in 2014. At the 2014 Girl Summit, the government signed a charter committing to end child marriage by 2020.

Action Plan to Ratified Child Marriage:

- Bangladesh has made it compulsory to present a birth certificate at the time of marriage.
- Child Marriage Free Unions are movements led by local government and facilitated by Plan Bangladesh with the aim of enforcing existing law more effectively.
- In February 2017, Parliament adopted the Child Marriage Restraint Act despite widespread concerns over a special provision allowing child marriage in ‘special cases’. The government has also begun developing, under the leadership of the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, a National Action Plan to Eliminate Child Marriage 2015-2021.

Loophole in the Act

The minimum legal age for marriage in Bangladesh is 18 years for girls and 21 for boys. However, the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017 includes a loophole where a court can allow child marriage in “special cases”. The act does not explicitly define what are those special cases? That is why it becomes so ambiguous that implementation differs from person to person.

International convention for Combating Child Marriage

At the international level, there are several legal instruments, which suggest the illegality of child marriage. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares that marriage can be entered into “only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses” Additionally, the 1979 CEDAW prohibits child marriage, stipulating 18 as the minimum age in its General Recommendation 21

Why these laws are not working according to expectation?

Despite of strong legal frameworks, their enforcement is often weak. Here are some common problems:

- Age of marriage laws contradict each other.
 - Child marriages happen outside of the law.
 - Birth and marriage registration is weak or non-existent.
 - Different religions or traditions’ position on child marriage are misinterpreted.
 - Child marriage happens in rural areas with few resources to implement the law.
 - Fake birth registration through bribe hides the age of the girls
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- Mostly this happen secretly and becoming a hidden problem

Education is the Strong vehicle to Resist Child Marriage

Child Marriage often Marks the End of a Girl’s Education. When a girl marries, she usually dropout from school and takes domestic responsibilities. Child brides miss out on the education they need to grow as individuals and the opportunity to learn skills that will help them to earn livelihood towards empowerment and better life. Married girls most of the time unable to continue education because of societal role as a mother and domestic responsibilities to other members of the family.

Education is a Protective Factor against Child Marriage

Child marriage has been cited as one of the key reasons for increased school dropout rates for girls in Bangladesh. Forty percent girls aged 15-19 have dropped out of schools, according to 2015 BBS data. “This may increase if we fail to stop child marriage,” Rasheda K Chowdhury, executive director of Campaign for Popular Education,

said. Each year of additional secondary education reduces the risk of marriage before the age of 18 by 4.1%, and the risk of having the first child before 18 by 6%, the World Bank study suggests. It is rare for an adolescent girl to continue school after she is married, the report added. “Through its impact on education, child marriage reduces earnings in adulthood for women marrying early by 9% and ending child marriage could increase the population’s earnings and productivity nationally by 1%,” it added. Rasheda said continuous investment in both primary and secondary education sectors will help curb child marriage. When girls are in school, they are often regarded as children, not ready for marriage. As long as girls stay in school, the less likely she is to be married off before 18 and to have children during her teenage. When girls are educated, they become matured to express their opinion with confidence, regarding marriage issue. It has been proven that education can protect girls from child marriage to a large extent.

Distance learning as an alternative approach to Mainstreaming education can minimize child marriage

Role of Bangladesh Open University

Bangladesh Open University has the huge capabilities of manpower and technological support. It has a huge infrastructural support all over the country. BOU is committed to reach the unreached and to implement inclusive education. As a public university it is committed to serve Bangladesh Government’s mission and vision to combat the child marriage in Bangladesh. One of the most adverse consequences of early marriage is the rise in drop-out rate of girls from formal school. Some parents withdraw their daughters from formal schooling to protect their daughters from not losing their respect and also keep them safe, parents keep their daughters at home, ultimately in most of the cases it turns to child marriage. As a result girls are becoming the victims of violence to be married at childhood. It destroys their social life, childhood life and educational life. Bangladesh Open University with its inherent nature of flexibility of place, time and modality has overcome the situation of insecurity. Bangladesh Open University has the huge capabilities of manpower and technological support. It has a huge infrastructural support all over the country. BOU is committed to reach the unreached and to implement inclusive education. As a public university it is committed to serve Bangladesh Government’s mission and vision to combat the child marriage in Bangladesh.

Strategies:

- The strategies used to break the cycle of child, early and forced marriage to reach the hardest-to-reach girls and women are built on three pillars: the community, the learning institutions and the girls. ODL has the capacity to break the old pillars on new mind-set.
- Providing skills development for livelihood can prevent child marriage with assurance of economic solvency which is the prime cause of child marriage. ODL by using its blended approaches can eventually reduce the costs of training and reaches the unreached sections of society. Video and TV are popular technologies as are basic mobile phones. Open Education Resources (OER) can also provide quality content to scale up training opportunities while at the same time reducing costs. Bangladesh Open University has a large media center with huge skilled manpower and technology.

- Technology plays an important role in this process – it could be print, audio, video, radio, TV, mobile devices and online options. Context determines the technology choices. By employing relevant technology, remote areas can have full access to the networked environment in a very cost- and time-effective manner. Bangladesh Open University as a public university has the opportunity to go for collaboration with government institutional support.
- Massive awareness program to mobilize the community to understand the value of girl's education is needed. Bangladesh Open University is extended with its regional center all over Bangladesh. It is possible to arrange face to face awareness meeting with the community people through a particular project and through audio-visual support arrange a talk show, docu-drama etc.
- Through skill development based on the needs and demands of the locality can reduce child marriage.
- Apprenticeship is needed to train the girls to develop their skill any trade. It will give them assurance for future job and will give hope of economic security to the parents

Concluding Remarks

Way to Prevent Child Marriage

Violence against women is a social evil and child marriage is the gravest evil which can ruin the whole life of a girl. As a consequence of child marriage girls suffer mentally, physically, financially and socially. It is a social evil and should be treated socially. Social action is probably the most effective shield against it. Social mobilization must, therefore, be attained to curb violence. There are several pre-conditions to ensure a social movement. First, society must know the extent and gravity of the problem, and harmful effects should be brought home to them. People must be made to feel the harm, the loss, the agony, and the cruelty that they or their near and dear ones may suffer from unabated violence. Education can resist this type of violence and distance education can be the agent of transformation of the society. It is very encouraging that through distance education, women are becoming an asset of the family. In the urban areas and also in some rural areas. The younger, generally are more affluent urban, educated women may not live as the past generation did. With wider contact, the growing necessity to earn and other contemporary changes in the everyday lives of the people, many urban and some rural women are becoming aware of their need to become independent. Our national dailies regularly publish reports like "Papia is afraid to go to school" or "Parents are afraid to send their girls to schools. "If we consider those stories, we will realize sadder dimensions to the incidents, such as "Parents security concern forces papia to marry off early. As a result, these girls are forced to go back the traditional household roles. Women are forced to go back to their traditional child bearing roles, the family members remain helpless, and the society has to pay huge. This paper shows that open schooling can provide an adaptable and flexible approach as an alternative to formal schooling for Bangladeshi women. It is proved that Open and Distance Learning is the best affordable place for the disadvantaged people of Bangladesh. It really reached to the unreached to change a person, community and society to combat an evil which destroy people's human rights.

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