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## Effects of Child Marriage on Girls' Education and Empowerment

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### Abstract

Although Convention on the Rights of Child declared that any marriage of an under 18 child will be considered as "Child Marriage", the age limit of girls' marriage was proposed to change from 18 to 16 in the draft Child Marriage Restraint Act Bangladesh 2014. This paper aims to analyse the effects of child marriage on Bangladeshi village girls' formal education and empowerment which hopefully will lead to bring awareness among the patriarchal societies. Rangpur region was purposively selected to design this study in a case study approach. The concept of empowerment was used with an interpretive methodological approach which allowed to consciously interpreting the data from secondary relevant sources. The findings of this review article revealed the ways in which child marriages hinder the opportunity of girls to be educated and push them back to not being empowered in the patriarchal society. The study's implication for policy and practice rooted deeply on the collaboration of NGO programmes, government interventions and family support.

**Key words:** *Child marriage, girls' education, empowerment, Bangladesh*

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## **Background of the Study**

Child marriage considering severe defilement of human rights needs serious attention in Bangladesh where this rate is highest in the whole world. About 65% of the women in this country married before the age of 18 (Plan Bangladesh 2013; UNICEF Data 2013), though ‘under the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929), the legal marriage age in Bangladesh is 18 years for girls and 21 years for boys’ (Plan Asia Regional Office 2013:12). Basically, ‘the term child marriage refers to any marriage of a child younger than 18 years old in accordance to Article of the Convention on the Rights of the child’ (Ijeoma et al. 2013:73). But recently Bangladesh Government has planned to lower the age of marriage. In 15<sup>th</sup> September 2014, the draft of Child Marriage Restraint Act 2014 was approved by the cabinet where 50,000 taka (523.88 euros) was fixed as penalty with highest 2 years in prison. Though 18 years old individual is still considered as child in the proposed law, the Bangladesh State Minister for Women and Children Affairs declared that the age limit of marriage will be changed from 18 to 16 in the final draft (Karim 2014).

Thus the problem area of this study is allied with the lowering of the age limit of marriage and finally its effect on girls’ education followed by their future empowerment as a woman. The significance of the study is rooted in the mentioned issue itself. In this 21<sup>st</sup> century, the status of child marriage varies in different parts of Bangladesh, especially between urban and rural areas. People may think that child marriage is no longer a big issue nowadays with the advancement of civil society. Unfortunately, current research showed that about 54% of 20-24 years old urban women experienced child marriage, while the rural women’s child marriage rate is about 71%. This issue is not as prominent for boys in both urban and semi-urban areas. Undoubtedly, education has a solid connection with it, about 86% of uneducated women had to get married before 18 and the women who got the chance to complete minimum secondary education showed a statistics of 26% of early marriage in the rural areas of Bangladesh (Plan Bangladesh 2013). Several studies found that poverty is the main reason of child marriage in Bangladesh (Ijeoma et al. 2013; Plan Bangladesh 2013) and village girls are the worst sufferer of this issue where they forced to stop going schools (Chowdhury 2004). It can be visualized that lowering the age will affect tremendously in these girls’ education because the association of marriage age and education is very strong (Human Development Resource Centre 2011). The Convention on the Rights of Child (1989) has clearly mentioned about the right of education on article 28 where the children should be encouraged to precede for higher education but legally lowering the age limit will create massive problem for the rural Bangladeshi girls.

## **Research Objective and Question**

The objective of this paper is to analyse the effects of child marriage on Bangladeshi village girls’ formal education and their empowerment, especially in the context of Rangpur region. To achieve the objective, one specific research question has been posed as the guiding question for the whole systematic analysis of the case: Hence, the guiding question of this paper is, ‘How child marriage effects on girls’ education and empowerment?’ The expectation from this study is to contribute in raising awareness among the patriarchal societies where girl’s education and empowerment is still not encouraged in a full extent.

## **Empowerment: The Concept as Framework for Analysis**

The Concept of empowerment propounded by Kabeer (1999) is pertinent to my study which is a buzzword in discussing various aspects in development studies. Empowerment entered into development lexicon some three decades ago and has been widely used since then. This term is closely rooted in the notion of power and its reverse, powerlessness. Kabeer noted, ‘in all societies, women have been denied choice to a far greater extent than men for any given social group’ (1999:12). Johnson (1994 quoted in Kabber 1999:12) pointed out that ‘although women can empower themselves by obtaining some form of control over different aspects of their lives, empowerment also suggests the need to gain some control over power structures, or to change them’. That means, empowerment refers to the process by which an individual can have the ability to practice his/her inner power by controlling the existing surroundings.



Figure: Three Interconnected Components of Empowerment by Kabeer (1999)

Kabeer (1999) explored the concept of empowerment through three closely interconnected dimensions of agency, resources, and achievements. Agency in her view represents the process by which choices are made and put into effect. The second component of empowerment is resources, it is the medium through which agency is exercised. It refers to the various materials, human and social resources that are distributed throughout society and positively influence the individual's ability to make choices. This agency of a person can challenge the power relation among different people. Thus, resources and agency combine to invest people with the capabilities to live the lives they want and this combination leads to have the third component of empowerment called "achievement" of life that is basically the outcome of the whole efforts. According to Kabeer, the process of empowerment implies change at different levels and has different dimensions. Accordingly, 'change can occur at the level of the individual, in their "inner" sense of self or in their access to material resources; it can occur in relationships within the family and household; or it can reflect alteration in position in the wider hierarchies of the economy and state' (Kabeer 1999:10).

Moreover, Kabeer (2005) also emphasized that individual empowerment should lead to some form of structural change if systemic inequalities are to be addressed. Here, women's empowerment is seen as a key strategy for gender equality. Empowerment may have come to mean different thing to different people but broad support for idea that women need to be empowered indicates a general agreement that they lack power and that power relation act to their disadvantage. Thus this concept of "empowerment" will facilitate to critically analyze the situation of child marriage and criticize how the situation and practice can effect on the rights of girls to continue their education.

### Methodological Approach

An Interpretive approach was used in this study which allowed me to analyse the already existing texts or situation of child marriage by constructing a meaningful reality. According to this approach, meanings were emergent from the whole analytical process where the study was based on particular context. Such interpretivist paradigm spontaneously facilitated to re-interpretation and negotiation during the analysis (Angen 2000). Theoretically, this approach facilitated to consciously use secondary data from relevant and renowned sources. Though several numerical data was used to portray the holistic situation, the analysis was mainly based on qualitative analysis. However, the case of Rangpur region was selected using purposive sampling technique. The purpose of selecting this particular region is that the rate of child marriage is highest in this region in Bangladesh (Dhaka Ahsania Mission 2014). It is noteworthy that, the under 18 girls of Rangpur region was considered as the main actor of this paper focusing on how this particular actors' education is exaggerated by the problem.

### Analysis of the Situation and Discussion

The findings from the secondary data is analysed with the mentioned explained framework by following the interpretive approach. For better readability, the findings are analysed and discussed under several sub-sections.

### **Demographic and Economic Context as Barriers to Education and Empowerment**

According to Human Development Resource Centre (2011: 3), 'early and forced marriage is most prevalent where poverty, birth and death rates are high, there is greater incidence of conflict and civil strife and lower levels of overall development, including schooling, employment and healthcare' which is completely similar to the context of Rangpur. This region is situated in the northern portion of Bangladesh where the main source of income is agriculture. About half of the population is living under the average poverty line. The per capita income and the literacy rate of this region are below the national average (Dhaka Ahsania Mission 2014). The percentage of girls' child marriage is noticeably much higher than the boys' child marriage there (Plan Asia Regional Office 2013). The girls are facing massive problem in forced marriage for which they have been deprived of education. The parents of those girls often cannot find any other option to force for marriage because of three main reasons; a) over populated area, b) illiteracy and c) extreme poverty. The marriage registrars popularly known as *Kazi* often receive high amounts from grooms' to register false age of brides (The Financial Express 2013). Such crimes are also the results of financial instability of the local workers like *Kazi* (Herz and Sperling 2004).

Some real life based examples can provide a space for the nuanced analysis of the situation. For instance, Aklima from Rangpur was a victim of such issue of child marriage. Due to extreme poverty of the family she was forced to get married while reading in grade IV. She wanted to have higher education but could not make it possible. So many girls in Rangpur cannot even complete their primary education because of such condition. In this case, the primary school teachers of Rangpur said that, the dropout rate in primary schools of girls is very alarming though the enrolment rate is satisfactory (The Financial Express 2013). Nargis from Rangpur is a similar example who wanted to be a teacher but got married to an older man while reading in grade VIII (Plan Bangladesh 2013). Like Aklima and Nargis, there are thousands of examples of forced child marriage in Rangpur which actually spoils the dreams of girls to complete formal education. The situation described above pointed out to the fact that, the young girls are deprived of proper "resources" that Kabeer (1990) explained as crucial medium through which girls will be able to exercise their own wish. Here the demographic location and economic instability are revealed as the barriers to ensure the appropriate resources to them. As a consequence, their socialization process lead to demolish their capacity to make choice as a woman in a patriarchal society. Drawing on Angen's (2000) idea on interpretive approach, the argument here revealed that the practice of power hierarchies by the so called existing superior gender put pressure to the 'girls' to motivate or force them in child marriage which basically provide them with zero achievements in life as an "individual" to admire. Finally it leads to close all the doors for those girls to be empowered through formal education.

### **Stereotypical Gendered Ideologies as Means to Lack of Education and Empowerment**

'Marriage at too young an age denies children the opportunity to develop their intellectual and social skills, including the ability to express themselves and to blossom in their own sense of autonomy, which are arguably the principal aims of education' (Action Aid 2011:12). Now, this quotation can be considered as one of the keys to the main argument. Research showed that the school dropout girls in Rangpur somehow become fully dependent on their husband and cannot be self-reliant (Dhaka Ahsania Mission 2014). It legitimizes the process in which girls gradually loss their ability to make choices in their lives due to having lack of education. Moreover, the way both boys and girls are getting socialized is still problematic in this 21<sup>st</sup> century because it promotes the gender hierarchies where the sex role socialization of the girls often keep them lagging behind (Lever, as cited in Risman and Davis, 2013). Forkan from Rangpur married to Hasina, a 14 years old girl, thought that the girl would be submissive as she was very young. This patriarchal society prefers young brides who is uneducated and do not have the ability to protest, it is believed that young girls are more obedient to the family. As a result, girls do not get the chance to develop their personality through education which is consistent with Chowdhury (2004) and thus gender established 'as a primary way of signifying relationships of power' (Scott 1988:48). According to Kabeer (2005), this powerlessness automatically represents the girls as an unempowered individual among the family members who gets used to being considered as someone who is much suitable to perform her gender-role only as caring 'mother', 'sister' or 'wife'. Besides, 'the detrimental impact of child marriage on girls' education and development is exacerbated by the fact that girls are often legally permitted to marry at a younger age than boys' (Action Aid 2011:12). My argument here is consistent with Fariaa (as cited in Ijeoma et al. 2013) who showed that a significant gender inequality lies in this social structure where girls are not getting the right to education which is very important for their life skills and power of negotiation. 'In families where investing in school for a daughter is still seen as a waste of money and time if the girl will in any case only become a wife and

mother, it is not so much views on education but rather perceptions of gender roles that need to be challenged and changed' (Human Development Resource Centre 2011:4).

### **Educational Settings and Family Responsibilities versus Education and Empowerment**

This section revealed how married girls are consciously being denied from the formal educational setting. Research showed that, child marriage 'can result in removal from school or limited access to educational opportunities' (Action Aid 2011:12). After marriage of the girls, the importance of continuing school hardly comes to the mind of the guardians. Even the well-known schools of Rangpur sometimes deny providing admission to married girls unfortunately (Plan Bangladesh 2013). Additionally, married girls even cannot get proper attention from the teachers in the schools and it is barely possible for them to engage in different educational programmes of the schools due to their family responsibilities and fundamentalist's religious values especially in the rural areas. The argument here is consistent with Chowdhury (2004) who depicted that being ignorant about sex education the girls become pregnant just after getting married which naturally forces them to take care of their babies by simply sacrificing education. Early marriage is thus limiting girls' educational opportunities where the married girls are pushed out by the educational structure and pulled out by the family members from the schools. Drawing on Kabeer's (1999) concept on empowerment such analysis portrays how the educational settings and patriarchal family structures are unable to provide a space for the girls to exercise their agency. Such lack of agency can hinder the opportunities in nurturing their "inner" selves.

### **Inconsistency in NGO Support and Government Intervention**

Some positive hopes exist on this aspect where the NGOs and local communities work for the rights of girls' education and try to convince the parents by discussing the side effects of child marriage. A relevant example on this positive note is Arjina from Rangpur who wanted to be a nurse and her father decided to get her married soon. But the community of that region was successful to make her parents delaying her marriage until she became 18 (UNICEF Bangladesh 2014). This example helps to shade light on the issue that if Bangladesh government lowers the age limit of the girls, the NGOs and the local communities will not be able to convince the parents anymore. By this way, the girls will hardly be able to come up with their dreams of fulfilling at least secondary education because people turn into almost 18 to complete secondary education in Bangladesh. However, studies showed that, NGOs often cannot implement their interventions due to lack of government support whereas government innovation also requires the support from local community and NGOs to ensure the appropriate benefits for the mass people (Batekas and Oette 2013). On this note regarding the support from NGOs, it is also important to consider that a "collaborative approach" from NGO, family and government is crucial to improve the situation with much empowered girls. Drawing on Kabeer's (2005) idea on how resources are interconnected with empowerment, this study here argues that single support as "resources" either from NGO or government is not enough to tackle down the issue rather a collaboration is on the demand to ensure quality education and empowerment of the girls.

### **Trapped in Multi-causal Effects**

Since poverty is a multi-faceted phenomenon, it becomes extremely difficult for parents to ensure the appropriate "resources" for girls in a poor context like Rangpur. Studies revealed that poverty encourages the illiterate parents to force their daughters to get married to a rich man (Ahmed 2005). That again put light on the issue of gender and power hierarchies where males are stereotypically bound to play the role of first breadwinner of the family and the whole family love to depend on him unintentionally or intentionally. As a result, child marriages create limitations on girls to be nourished as an independent personality (Herz and Sperling 2004). On the other hand, research revealed that even only one extra year of schooling can help to increase 10-20% of a woman's wage and World Bank stated that women with secondary education can definitely contribute in the country's per capita income growth. Therefore these global economic benefits disappear when child marriage limits girls' education (Vogelstein 2013). Finally, the lack of individual agency as referred to Kabeer (2005) hinders the possibility to ensure the structural change both locally and globally. However, 'though the overall impact of globalization on poverty remains disputed, there is broad agreement that globalization has exacerbated inequalities because of sharply diverging experiences at the individual level' (Gunter and Hoeven 2004:17). Therefore, child marriages of girls in overall Bangladesh will lead to work as a barrier in empowering girls and in continuing formal education.

## Conclusion and Implication

Drawing on an interpretive approach, this study constantly highlighted on the fact that since 'it is tempting and not uncommon to view "human rights" as something intrinsically good' (Batekas and Oette 2013:9), asking the rights of education for the poor village girls should never be neglected by child marriage. It is unfortunate that in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, girls are still suffering massively with this issue where they hardly can take them to the level of empowered. As a result, the girls are not getting the scopes to use their individual agency which may facilitate to have the structural change in the patriarchal society.

Consequently, the analysis of this paper provided a space to think why Bangladesh government needs to be more conscious in taking final decision of lowering girls' marriage age which is highly related to their education level and economic growth of the country. Besides, strong emphasize in completing secondary education of the poor village girls is needed by ensuring financial support from the government (Plan Bangladesh 2013). Furthermore, the analysis came out with the point that parenting and socialization of both girls and boys is crucial to be considered as one of the important aspect to mitigate the situation in global-local context. Overall, a collaborative approach from different NGO programmes and government initiative is necessary to widely root out child marriages which will allow girls to be empowered by nurturing their potentials. Otherwise, as I discussed above, dreams of education will be pathetically victimized by child marriages.

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