



CHILD, EARLY, AND FORCED MARRIAGE:

A Political Economy Analysis of Bangladesh

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Stock Photo, Bangladesh

In 2020-21, Iris Group conducted a series of gender-intentional political economy analyses (PEA) on the issue of child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) in eight countries. This brief is a summary of the full PEA report on CEFM in Bangladesh.

INTRODUCTION

Despite strong economic progress over the past two decades, Bangladesh has seen regressions in democratic governance^{1,2} and persisting gender inequality. Bangladesh ranked 135th on both the Gender Development Index and the Gender Inequality Index in 2019.³ While women have long occupied prominent political roles throughout the country, women's status in Bangladesh has been, since the country's founding, one of profound inequality. Among women aged 20-24 years in 2019, 15.5% were married before age 15 and 51.4% were married before age 18.⁴ Prevalence rates of child marriage vary widely between geographical regions. Since 2013, the country has shown scant progress in reducing child marriage rates.^{4,5} To reach the national target of ending child marriage by 2041, Bangladesh's progress must be eight times the current rate.

The political economy analysis of CEFM in Bangladesh consisted of a desk review and key informant interviews, with findings within the following four pillars of analysis:

- **Foundational Factors:** Embedded structures that are difficult or impossible to change, such as geography, class, ethnicity, gender inequality
- **Rules of the Game:** Laws, international commitments, policies, and social norms
- **Here and Now:** Current events and circumstances
- **Dynamics:** Interplay among the other pillars

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FINDINGS

Foundational Factors

- Child marriage prevalence rates among women aged 20- to 24-year-old vary greatly among the eight geographic divisions, ranging from 31% to 66.7%.⁶ Girls in rural areas have a 10% higher chance of marrying early.⁷
- Insecurity and natural disasters related to climate change can increase child marriage prevalence.⁸
- Poverty and the dowry system contribute to child marriage, but its prevalence is high even in the richest quintile (38%).^{6,9,10}
- Gender inequality is one of the primary drivers of child marriage in Bangladesh, as girls are considered liabilities for families from an economic and social standpoint.⁹

Rules of the Game

- The 2017 Child Marriage Restraint Act (CMRA) affirmed legal age of marriage as 18 for girls/women and 21 for boys/men.¹¹ The government abandoned a 2015 proposal to lower the legal age of marriage to 16 for girls and 18 for boys due to international and national pressure.¹²
- CMRA strengthened punishments for child marriages.⁹ However, it has many loopholes, has limited impact, and parents and authorities commonly evade its enforcement.^{13,14}
- Social and gender norms affect child marriage: dowry (although illegal) increases as girls age, thereby promoting early marriage;¹⁵ early marriage is seen as protecting family honor and controlling girls' sexuality;⁸ families see child marriage as a way to avoid general and dowry-related violence against girls;^{15,16} girls are expected to obey their families, not negotiate marital decision, and conform to expectations of early marriage.^{14,17}
- The benefits of child marriage – social/religious acceptance and economic advantage – outweigh the potential risks for families.¹⁰

Here and Now

- Government institutions working on child marriage have a costed plan to reduce prevalence, but do not appear to have the political will to pursue a coherent strategy.
- There is a robust civil society - including international organizations - working on child marriage. However, they are hindered by lack of coordination.
- Most approaches (e.g., educational, economic, gender norms, and more) have not overcome social norms and economic incentives that drive child marriage in Bangladesh.
- The economic impact of COVID-19 is likely severe, possibly resulting in higher prevalence rates of child marriage.

Dynamics

- **Progress:**
 - Bangladesh benefits from a strong women's rights movement, civil society and international involvement in the fight against child marriage, and grassroots youth groups.
 - There is a strong capacity for research, with sub-national data on child marriage trends and evidence on program success.
 - Small scale programs that shift social norms and focus on empowerment are succeeding in reducing child marriage.
- **Obstacles:**
 - There is growing conservatism around sexuality and adolescent rights and increasing authoritarianism, threatening to derail efforts that combat child marriage.
 - The Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs (MOWCA) is critical to the National Action Plan but has limited capacity to implement it.
 - There is a lack of coordinated advocacy strategies and strategic programming.
 - There are gaps in research on social norms and what works, where, and why.
 - Programs often do not address the root causes of CEFM.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Case for Investment

- **Bangladesh would benefit from a combination of actors pushing for increased political will.** Bangladesh has shown that it responds to international encouragement, and a positioning of anti-child marriage efforts as a critical COVID-19 recovery strategy could move the issue higher up on the agenda.
- **Bangladesh could provide rich and important lessons on CEFM.** The importance of gender-based violence and social norms as driving forces of CEFM creates an urgency for new approaches and provides a rich learning environment.

2. Key Points of Leverage on CEFM

- **The costed National Action Plan and its monitoring and evaluation framework can be leveraged for improved multi-sectoral coordination.** The creation of the Plan was an important benchmark, which now needs to be translated into a meaningful roadmap for accelerated action to address child marriage across government ministries.
- **Bangladesh-based development and research experience can be mobilized for increased progress.** Bangladesh-based organizations and research institutions have the capacity to fill some of the gaps in existing knowledge around child marriage, particularly on the factors affecting differential progress rates.

- **Subnational data provides improved clues on regional differences.** While not showing the full picture of why regional disparities in child marriage exist, improved subnational data collection is an important first step in understanding the disparate drivers and contextual circumstances that mitigates or sustains child marriage in divisions, districts, and villages.

3. Turning Gaps into Opportunities

- **Investing in rights-based civil society groups can help ensure girls' voices are central.** Women's groups and youth-led groups need to have a stronger voice in setting the direction of anti-CEFM efforts at a national and local level, and they have a history of activism around gender-based violence.
- **The Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs is critical to reducing child marriage and needs strengthening.** MOWCA currently needs greater capacity to convene other ministries and ensure implementation of the National Action Plan.
- **A cross-sectoral body that works at national and subnational levels can improve strategic coordination.** Government agencies, donors, implementing organizations, researchers, and advocates appear to be addressing child marriage in an uncoordinated way that can generate misunderstanding, resentment, confusion, and inefficiencies.

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