Determinants of Early Marriage in Rajshahi, Bangladesh

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Abstract: The primary data was collected from 600 ever-married women in Rasjshahi district, Bangladesh. The findings show that 90% marriages occur at early ages and mean age at marriage is very low i.e. 15.33 years. Literate women marry later than their illiterate counterparts. In this study the multivariate logistic regression analysis was conducted to identify the factors affecting early marriage. It provides that woman's education, work status of women, husband's education, family composition and mass-media exposure variables are the important determinants for early marriage.

Key words: Early marriage, woman's education, importnant determinats, effecting factors, Bangladesh

INTRODUCTION

Early Marriage tends to experience early childbearing, a longer period of exposure to the risk of pregnancy and thus, higher fertility levels. Early marriage associated with early initiation of child bearing may adversely affect the health of women and their children (Al-Sabir *et al.*, 2005).

Early marriage is generally defined as marital union before the age of 18 in Bangladesh (UNICEF, 2001). Through a government order in 1976, the minimum legal age of marriage was fixed at 18 years for females. Nevertheless, young ages at marriage and early childbearing have been encouraged in Bangladesh (Islam and Mahmud, 1996). About 80% of Bangladeshi women marry when they are still teenagers and 50% of women married by the time they were age 15 (Mitra *et al.*, 2000). Again, the latest BDHS survey showed that 68% of women aged 20-24 years were married before age 18. It is also observed that the lower median age at first marriage for women is 14 years in Rajshahi division (Al- Sabir *et al.*, 2005).

Early marriage impact on girls have three key concerns are the denial of childhood and adolescence, the curtailment of personal freedom and lack of opportunity to develop a full sense of selfhood as well as the denial of psychosocial and emotional well-being, reproductive health and emotional opportunity. Young girls are robbed of their youth and required to take on roles for which they are not psychologically or physically prepared (Patricia, 1987). Many have no choice about the timing of marriage or their partner. Some are coerced into marriage, while others are too young to make an informed decision. Young females deprived of the opportunity to complete schooling have difficulty in developing their own identity and less confidence in voicing their opinions (UNICEF, 2001). In addition, girls married, at a young age are less equipped to care for themselves and their children and are more economically and psychosocially dependent on their husbands (Singh and Sharma, 1996). This early marriage also deprives them of the opportunity for personal development as well as their rights to full reproductive health and well-being, education and participation in civic life.

In view of the high incidence of adolescent childbearing in Bangladesh, appropriate policy and programmatic measures should be undertaken immediately to reduce the incidence of early marriage and early childbearing that can have negative health, social and economic consequences, including the curtailment of education and job prospects of young mothers (Islam, 1999).

In this study it has been observed the patterns, differentials and determinants of early marriage in Rajshahi district, Bangladesh. It also analyses factors associated with early marriage and draws out important policy implications from the findings of the study.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data were collected on 600 ever-married women by using simple random sampling technique. The study was based on ever married women of age 12-49 years of which 300 women in the rural areas and the remaining 300 from urban areas of Rajshahi district. The data were collected during the period 10 June 2005-30 July 2005.

For data collection purpose, personal interview approach followed, this method relates to the collection of information directly from the women. A woman was

directly contacted and the desire information was collected through pre-designed questionnaire. The purpose of putting each question was explained to them and they were told about the scope of survey and manner in which the answer are to be recorded.

Various statistical techniques such as frequency, percentage age distribution, mean and median were used to observe the age pattern and differentials of early marriage in Rajshahi. Finally, the multivariate logistic regression was used to identify the determinants of early marriage in Rajshahi. This non linear form of multivariate analysis is well suited to the modeling tasks at hand by allowing one to estimate the effects of a set of explanatory variables on the probability of some outcome or event. One of its main appealing properties is that the explanatory variables need not be normally distributed. The estimated coefficients for the explanatory variables from logistic regression represent the reductions or increases in the log odds of being in one category of a predictor variable versus another. A more facile interpretation of the coefficient is obtained be exponentiation (e^b), which gives the relative odds of the two categories of comparison.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Age pattern of early marriage in Rajshahi: Early marriage and early childbearing is very common in Rajshahi district, Bangladesh. Table 1 depicts the level of age at first marriage and age at first childbearing by age group of women. It shows that maximum numbers of marriages take place within age group 15-19 years (65.2%). After that it suddenly falls down to 8.5% at age group 20-24 years and it decreases 1.8% for age group 25-29 years. At an early age group less than 15 year, it contributes the second highest percentage (24.6%) of marriages. The result provides that more than 50% (65.1%) of women produce first birth at 15-19 years and 28.1% women give first birth at aged 20-24 years. After 25 years a little proportion of women give their first birth in Rajshahi division.

The data presented in the Table 2 shows that about 90% had been married when they were below age 18 years and only 10% were married at aged 18 years or older. Thus, it is shown that about 90% of marriages occur in the study area at early ages (age at marriage less than 18 years). This leads to an exceptionally low mean and median age at first marriage, i.e. 15.33 years and 15.22 years, respectively.

It is also evident from Table 3 that most of the early marriages take place at the ages 13-14 years; This age group accounts for 56.5% of the total marriages. More

Table 1: Distribution of Women by Age at First Marriage and Age at First Birth

	Age at first marriage		Age at firstbirth	
Age group	N	(%)	N	(%)
<15	147	24.6	0	0
15-19	391	65.2	351	65.1
20-24	51	8.5	156	28.9
25-29	17	1.8	25	4.7
30-34	0	0	7	1.3

Table 2: Distribution of Ever Married Women by Age at Marriage

Age at marriage	Frequency	Percent	Mean	Median
<18 years	538	89.7	15.33	15.22
18 years and older	62	10.3	21.92	21.32
Total	600	100.0	16.01	15.53

than 70% of early marriages occur at age 15 or younger. Early married women who were currently younger than age 30 at the time of the interview show higher mean ages at first marriage than their older counterparts. The highest mean age at marriage (15.72 years) was observed among women who were aged less than 18 at the time of the interview and 15.62 years for age group 18-29. The corresponding figures for the age groups 30-39 and 40 and older are 15.15 and 14.73 years, respectively. Among the married women who were currently aged below 18 at the time of the interview, 0.8% had been married by the age of 12. The proportion rises to 5.0% for the cohort of married women who were aged 18-29 at the time of the interview. It rises further to 7.10% for the cohort of married women who were aged 30-39 at the time of the survey but at age 40 and older, it suddenly falls to 2.4%, as we take interview only up to age 49 years of married women and truncated most of the higher ages women, this cohort of women show low percentage. If we study up to age 39 years of women, than the results indicate that the older cohorts had a lower mean age at marriage than their younger counterparts; it also confirms the trend towards increasing age at marriage in the study region which is shown in the Fig. 1. From the above analysis we find out that most of the ever-married women enter marriage within a very narrow age range and at a very early age. Although the legally sanctioned age at marriage is 18 years, it is seldom observed in Rajshahi division.

Differentials of early marriage in Rajshahi: Early marriage is a cultural variable, which may be influenced by a host of socio-economic variables. The socio-economic variables considered in this study are: Education, occupation, residence, mass media etc. play an important role for explaining the differentials of early marriage. These factors are chosen because of the availability of the data and because the available evidence suggests that they are important determinants of early marriage in Rajshahi, Bangladesh.

Table 3: Distribution of early married women by age at first marriage and current age

Current age	Age at marriage									Mean
	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	
<18 years	Na	2(0.4)	2(0.4)	6(1.1)	9(1.7)	11(2.0)	10(1.9)	6(1.1)	Na	15.72
18-29 years	1(0.2)	14(2.6)	12(2.2)	31(5.8)	50(9.3)	35(6.5)	30(5.6)	38(7.1)	7(1.3)	15.62
30-39 years	3(0.6)	12(2.2)	23(4.3)	41(7.6)	42(7.8)	25(4.6)	18(3.3)	25(4.6)	7(1.3)	15.15
40+ years	1(0.2)	5(0.9)	7(1.3)	26(4.8)	22(4.1)	6(1.1)	3(0.6)	6(1.1)	2(0.4)	14.73
Total Count	5(0.9)	33(6.1)	44(8.2)	104(19.3)	123(22.9)	77(14.3)	61(11.3)	75(13.9)	16(3.0)	15.33
Cumulative %	0.9	7.1	15.2	34.6	57.4	71.7	83.1	97.0	100.0	Na

Notes: Na = Not available and na = Not applicable

Table 4: Socio-economic differentials of early marriage in Rajshahi

	Age at marriage		
Background characteristics	Less than 18	18 and older	All
Current residence			
Urban	264(49.1)	36(58.1)	300(50.0)
Rural	274(50.9)	26(41.9)	300(50.0)
Child hood residence			
Rural	359(66.7)	37(59.7)	396(66.0)
Urban	179(33.3)	25(40.3)	204(34.0)
Family composition			
Nuclear	472(87.7)	36(58.0)	508(84.7)
Combined	66(12.3)	26(42.0)	92(15.3)
Women's Education			
No education	192(35.7)	20(32.3)	212(35.3)
Primary	180(33.5)	17(27.4)	197(32.9)
Secondary and higher	166(30.8)	25(40.3)	191(31.8)
Husband's Education			
No education	189(35.1)	18(31.1)	207(34.5)
Primary	178(33.1)	19(32.8)	197(32.8)
Secondary and higher	171(31.8)	25(43.1)	196(32.7)
Work Status of Women			
Not Worked	480(89.2)	34(54.8)	514(85.7)
Worked	58(10.8)	28(45.2)	86(14.3)
Husband's Occupation			
Farmer	190(35.3)	13(21.0)	203(33.8)
Service	163(30.3)	36(58.1)	199(33.2)
Business	90(16.7)	10(16.1)	100(16.7)
Labor	90(16.7)	3(4.8)	93(15.5)
Others	5(.9)	Na	5(.8)
Ownership of property			
No	494(91.8)	26(41.9)	520(86.7)
Yes	44(8.2)	36(58.1)	80(13.3)
Ownership of electricity			
No	320(59.5)	23(37.0)	343(57.2)
Yes	218(40.5)	39(63.0)	257(42.8)
Access to mass-media			
No	284(52.8)	30(48.4)	314(52.3)
Yes	254(47.2)	32(51.6)	286(47.7)

Notes: Figure in parentheses indicate the percentage value between early married and adult married women; Na = Not available

Table 4 provides percentage distribution of early-married women (age at marriages less than 18 years) and adult married women (age at marriage greater than or equal to 18) by selected socio-economic characteristics for comparison purposes.

The results indicate that, among all ever-married women, 50% live in rural areas and another 50% live in urban areas. It also shows that 49.1% early-married women have a urban background and 50.9% coming from rural area.

The corresponding figures for women who married in adult age are 58.1 and 41.9%, respectively. It is evident, therefore, that early marriage is more prevalent in rural rather than urban areas of the study region but it is not remarkable.

Childhood residence is a stronger differentiating background variable than current residence, probably owing to rural to urban migration. Among all women, 67% are born in rural area and 33% in urban area. The percentage of women marrying age before 18, who had been born and brought up in a rural area rises to 59.8% and the urban childhood type of residence contributes only 33.3%. Corresponding figures for women marring at 18 and over are 7.2 and 3.2%, respectively.

Of all ever-married women, 84.7% come from nuclear family and 15.3% come from composite family. Early-married women of nuclear family are 87.7 and 12.3% are members of composite family. The corresponding figure for adult married women are 58.0 and 42.0%, respectively. This clearly indicates that early marriage is substantially prevalent in nuclear family than combined family. This is mainly because girls are more secure from socio-economic and family background in combined family than nuclear family.

Education is the single most important indicator of the socio-economic status of an individual that affects almost all aspects of human life. It is a key determinant of the life style and status of an individual in a society. Of all ever-married women 35.3% had no education, 32.9% had primary education and 31.8% had secondary and higher education. Among the early-married women 35.7% had no education, 33.5% completed primary and 30.8% completed secondary and higher education. On the other hand, women who marry 18 year and older, among them 40.3% completed secondary and higher education. Husband's education shows the similar pattern of women's education.

Work status has an impact on early marriage. The data provides that majority of the women (85.7%) doesn't work outside home. The occupational levels of respondents who are not engaged in any occupation (housewife) are 89.2% who marry early aged less than 18 years and only 10.8% early married women are involved in any occupational activities. On the other hand, 45.2% are involved in any occupation who marry 18 years and older. This outcome suggests that early marriage is

comparatively few to women who engage in any occupation but the effect is very little, because employment opportunity is very limited in Rajshahi.

The result indicates that among women of husband, 33.8% are farmer, 33.2% are service holders, 16.7% are businessman, 15.5% are labor and 0.8% is not worked at all. Early marriage is highest among women whose husbands are farmers (35.3%) and adult marriage is highest among women whose husbands are service holder (58.1%). The result also reveals that the husbands' occupation when broadly classified as professional and non-professional categories, it is observed that non-profession poses the highest percentage of early marriage.

Early marriage is more prevalent among landless women. About 91.8% landless women marry at early ages. But, 58.1% woman who belong property marries at 18 years and older ages.

Electricity itself is considered as an indicator of modernization. Household having electricity are, in general, indicative of higher socio-economic status. Among early-married women, 59.5% had no electricity and 40.5% had electricity. On the other hand, women who marry 18 years and older, among them 37.0% had no electricity and 63.0% had electricity.

Access to modern mass media, such as listening radio, watching T.V., etc., have an effect on the awareness of the adverse effect of early marriage. Among early-married women who do not access any mass media are 52.8% and who access are 47.2%. But women who marry 18 years and older among them 51.6% access mass media and 48.4% do not access any media. This result indicates that access to mass media has a positive association with early marriage and it is significantly effective.

Covariates of early marriage in Rajshahi: logistic regression analysis: Logistic regression was used to identify the risk factors for early marriage. In the model, age at first marriage was used as the dependent variable, which we dichotomized by assigning the value of 1 for age at marriage less than 18 years and the value of 0 for age at 18 years and older; selected socio-economic characteristics were used as explanatory variables. The explanatory variables considered in the model are the categorical and are shown in the Table 5.

Table 5 gives the estimates of the logistic regression coefficients (B) corresponding to the independent variables and relative odds calculated for each category of the categorical variables. The category with relative odds of 1.00 represents the reference category for that variable. If the odds ratio is greater than unity, the probability of age at marriage occurring below 18 years is

Table 5: Results of logistic regression analysis for age at marriage below 18 years according to socioeconomic characteristics

Variables	Coefficients (B)	Wald Test	Significant	Odds Ratio
Current residence				
Urban	-	-	-	1.00
Rural	0.955	0.902	0.29	2.599
Childhood residence				
Rural	-	-	-	1.00
Urban	-0.168	0.071	0.791	0.845
Women's education				
Higher secondary or above	-	0.291	0.589	1.00
No education	0.411	6.693	0.01	1.508
Primary	2.08	2.315	0.128	8.003
Secondary	0.724	10.353	0.016	2.064
Husband's education				
Higher secondary or above	-	-	-	1.00
No education	2.078	5.9	0.015	7.987
Primary	1.386	4.107	0.043	3.998
Secondary	1.469	8.979	0.003	4.344
Work status of women				
Worked	-	3.362	0.067	1.00
Not worked	0.991	1.06	0.787	2.693
Occupation of husband				
Labor	-	-	-	
1.00Farmer	-0.652	0.69	0.406	0.521
Service	-0.78	1.032	0.31	0.458
Business	-0.622	0.63	0.427	0.537
Family composition				
Combined	-	-	-	1.00
Nuclear	0.985	6.342	0.012	2.677
Ownership of property				
Yes	-	-	-	1.00
No	0.35	0.461	0.497	1.419
Ownership of electricity				
Yes	-	-	-	1.00
No	-0.335	0.485	0.486	0.715
Access to mass media				
Yes	-	-	-	1.00
No	0.916	3.69	0.055	2.499

higher than that of age at marriage occurring at 18 years and older. To test the significance of variables it has been used Wald test procedure.

It has been observed that women's education, work status of women, husband's education, family composition and access to mass media have significant impact on age at marriage and other variables do not produce the significant results. It appears that women's education is the most important factor that influences age at marriage being below 18 years, when the other variables are controlled. The relative odds for no education, primary and secondary education is found to be 1.508, 8.003 and 2.064, respectively. This shows that the likelihood of age at marriage below 18 years among women with no education and primary and secondary education is 1.508, 8.003 and 2.064 times higher respectively, than that higher secondary or above educated women. Thus, we may conclude that increasing the level of education for females could rise age at marriage in Rajshahi district.
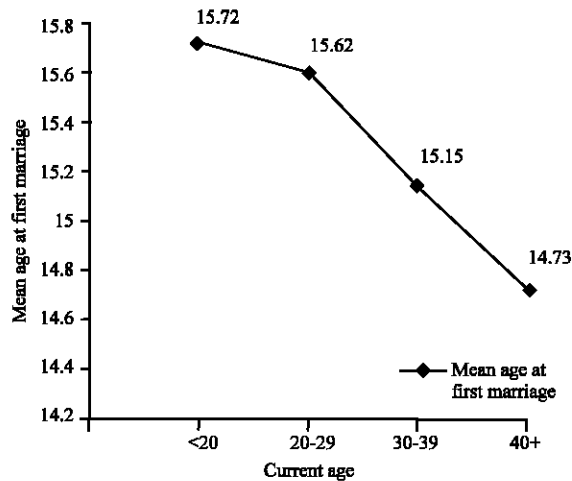
Fig. 1: Distribution of current age b mean age at first merriage

The analysis indicates that the respondent's work status is the next most important determinant influencing low age at marriage. It has been observed that age at marriage below 18 years is likely to be 2.693 times higher among women who doesn't work than women who works. The analysis further shows that husband's education has a significant and positive effect on low age at marriage. The results show that women whose husbands have been educated at the primary and secondary level had a significantly higher likelihood (odds of 3.998 and 4.334) of low age at marriage compared with those having a higher secondary or above education. Women whose husbands are not educated were much more likely (odds of 7.987) to have been married at a young age than those with a higher secondary or above education.

The occurrence of low age at marriage is considerably higher (2.677 times) in women who are the member of the nuclear family than the combined family. This may be due to the fact that in combined family females are well supported from socio-economic concern.

Access to mass media is one of the important effective factors that influence the age at marriage. The analysis indicates that respondents, who do not access to any mass media, have 2.499 times higher chance of marry before age 18, than those who access to any mass media.

This study demonstrates that early marriage is very common in Rajshahi district, Bangladesh. It is observed that about 90% of marriages in the study area are early marriages. This leads to an exceptionally low average age at first marriage, i.e. 15.33 years, which is well below the minimum legal age of marriage for females, i.e. 18 years, established by the Government in 1976 (Islam and Mahmud, 1996). Legislation on age at marriage, therefore, seems to be ineffective in delaying childhood marriage in Bangladesh.

It has also been observed that older cohorts of early married women have a lower mean age at marriage than their younger counterparts, which confirms that there is a trend towards increasing age at marriage in the study region, but the rise is at a very slow pace. In these circumstances, as the existing legislation is not working well and the prevailing cultural and social norms are unlikely to foster a delay in marriage, other avenues such as policies and programs to increase the opportunities for education, empowerment in decision-making and employment outside the home for young women all of which are likely to result in delayed marriage.

Education is one of the most viable means for enhancing the status of women and at the same time rising the age at marriage. Therefore, even more vigorous attempts should be made to keep the girls in school for an extended period. Along with formal education, women must have access to informal education. One dimension of informal education is that women should be made aware of the risks and consequences of early marriage. It is encouraging to note that a secondary school scholarship program for girls was introduced in Bangladesh in the early 1990s. For this program, a sudden increase in marriage was postponement, as parents were required to sign a bond that their daughters would not marry before age 18 (Mary and Amin, 2000). However, early marriage is more prevalent in Rajshahi district. Government with trusted NGOs should be taken community based intervention to keep their daughters in school and ensure that they receive their right to a basic education for empowerment and intellectual development.

Work status has an effect on marriage and this is unlikely to influence age at marriage in any significant way. In this regard government should take appropriate measures to create more employment opportunities for young women and make efforts to employ more young women in the field of health and education. Marriage should be entered into with the full consent of the intending couples. Special efforts should be made to provide paid employment for women in suitable places. Government should provide livelihood skills training and support for working teenagers ensuring marriage is not a pre-condition for eligibility in development schemes, such as micro-credit programs by improving economic status to delay age at marriage.

Mass-media campaigns such as radio, television and other traditional communication methods are an important means to reach communities especially in rural areas. A social mobilization programme through mass media might to be an effective way to change the orthodox religious and cultural values regarding when to marry and whom to marry" (Islam and Ahmed, 1998).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Finally, it may conclude that the existing old and ineffective vital registration system should be amended; the issuing of a birth certificate or equivalent evidence needs to be made a legal requirement for marriage and other purposes, such as admission to educational institutions and entry into service. Owing to the lack of actual date of birth, adherence to legislation is impossible because it is very simple for marriage partners or guardians to conceal the couple's age.

Government should support for physical well being to maintain sexual and reproductive health by ensuring that youth are fully informed about sex, reproduction and related risks. This will be very helpful to postponement of early marriage.

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