

## **CHILD MARRIAGE IN RURAL BANGLADESH: A STUDY OF TRENDS AND INFLUENCING FACTORS**

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### **Abstract**


*Child marriage remains a deeply entrenched challenge in Bangladesh, disproportionately affecting rural girls and undermining their health, education, and economic potential. This study investigates the prevalence, drivers, and lived realities of child marriage in rural contexts, drawing on nationally representative survey data and qualitative interviews. Quantitative findings reveal a rising trend in child marriage and a strong correlation with early childbirth, food insecurity, and low paternal education. Regression analysis highlights key risk factors, including poverty, traditional gender norms, and religious affiliation, while protective factors include delayed menarche and the presence of male siblings. Qualitative insights underscore the role of social stigma, reputational anxiety, and digital exploitation in shaping marriage decisions. The study also evaluates the effectiveness of intervention strategies, finding that conditional economic incentives outperform adolescent empowerment programs in delaying marriage. Legal frameworks, particularly the 'special provision' clause in the Child Marriage Restraint Act (2017), are shown to be vulnerable to misuse, weakening enforcement. By integrating statistical analysis with community narratives, this research offers a nuanced understanding of child marriage in rural Bangladesh and identifies pathways for targeted, context-sensitive interventions. The findings emphasize the need for structural reforms, localized engagement, and sustained investment in education and economic resilience to disrupt the cycle of early marriage.*

**Keywords:** Child Marriage; Rural Bangladesh; Gender Norms; Socioeconomic Vulnerability; Policy Intervention.

### **1. Introduction**

Marriage involving individuals under the age of 18 remains a widespread and deeply harmful practice, particularly affecting girls and undermining broader societal progress. In Bangladesh, the prevalence of child marriage is among the highest in the world: over half of all girls—approximately 51%—are married before turning 18, and 16% are wed before reaching the age of 15 (Girls Not Brides, 2024). This persists even though the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 legally sets the

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minimum age of marriage at 18 for girls and 21 for boys (Plan Bangladesh, 2013); mainly due to the weak enforcement and provisions that permit child marriage in ‘special cases’ (Tauseef & Sufian, 2024). Child marriage remains significantly more common in rural Bangladesh, where 53.8% of girls marry before the age of 18, compared to 44.0% in urban settings (UNICEF, 2020). This disparity reflects deep-rooted structural and cultural factors—poverty, limited access to education, entrenched gender inequality, and prevailing social norms—that continue to drive early marriage. In economically disadvantaged households, girls are often perceived as financial liabilities, and marriage is seen as a means to reduce economic pressure, ensure social security, and conform to traditional expectations of femininity and family honor. These dynamics underscore the urgent need for targeted research into the specific drivers and lived realities of child marriage in rural communities.

Child marriage severely restricts girls’ access to education and employment, thereby constraining their personal development and long-term potential (Girls Not Brides, 2024). Among its most critical consequences is the heightened threat it poses to the physical health of adolescent girls. Biologically, their bodies are often unprepared for the rigors of pregnancy and childbirth, resulting in increased risks of maternal mortality, obstructed labor, and neonatal death (Patoari, 2020). The situation is particularly acute for girls under the age of 15, who are five times more likely to die during pregnancy or childbirth than women in their twenties. Moreover, infants born to these young mothers face elevated risks of low birth weight, premature delivery, and early mortality, compounding the intergenerational cycle of vulnerability.

Beyond its immediate physical risks, child marriage profoundly undermines the long-term socioeconomic prospects of girls (Plan Bangladesh, 2013). By compelling them to leave school prematurely, it deprives them of access to formal education and the opportunity to acquire essential skills, thereby constraining their future employment opportunities and earning capacity (Malé & Wodon, 2016). This educational disruption not only entrenches individual poverty but also perpetuates intergenerational disadvantage, as the socioeconomic limitations experienced by child brides often extend to their children. The broader economic implications are significant: a joint study by the World Bank and the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) estimated that eliminating child marriage in Bangladesh could result in a 12.0% increase in women’s earnings and productivity (Girls Not Brides, 2024), highlighting the transformative potential of addressing this practice through policy and education reform.

The social and emotional consequences of child marriage are deeply consequential, compounding the physical and economic harms associated with the practice. Girls married in early adolescence are effectively deprived of their childhood and prematurely burdened with adult responsibilities, often within restrictive domestic environments. This abrupt transition frequently results in social isolation, as young brides are separated from their peer networks and face limited mobility and autonomy (Parsons *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, child marriage significantly heightens the risk of exposure to domestic and familial violence, encompassing physical, emotional, and sexual abuse (Kidman, 2016). The psychological trauma stemming from such experiences can have enduring effects, often persisting across the lifespan and proving resistant to recovery or intervention (Ricker *et al.*, 2023).

Efforts to combat child marriage in Bangladesh have involved a concerted push from both governmental and non-governmental actors, each playing a distinct yet complementary role. The Government of Bangladesh has introduced a range of policy measures and legal frameworks aimed at curbing child marriage, including national action plans, awareness campaigns, and enforcement mechanisms. Simultaneously, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been instrumental in operationalizing these efforts at the community level—mobilizing local stakeholders, empowering adolescent girls, facilitating access to education and services, and fostering behavioral change through advocacy and outreach. Despite these initiatives, persistent challenges remain, particularly in the enforcement of existing laws, the dissemination of accurate information, and the dismantling of socio-cultural norms that sustain child marriage, especially in rural and marginalized communities.

This study seeks to examine the national patterns of child marriage in Bangladesh, with a particular focus on rural contexts, and to explore the perceptions held by both parents and adolescent girls regarding this persistent issue. By investigating these perspectives, the research aims to uncover the structural and cultural drivers that sustain child marriage and to illuminate its long-term consequences for girls and their families. Acknowledging the enduring prevalence of child marriage in rural areas, the study critically engages with the socio-economic and normative conditions that reinforce the practice. Beyond identifying trends and contributing factors, the research also evaluates the extent to which individuals and communities exercise agency in resisting and mitigating child marriage, thereby offering insights into grassroots strategies and potential pathways for transformative change.

Specially, this study pursues several interrelated objectives to deepen understanding of child marriage in rural Bangladesh. First, it analyzes temporal trends and geographic patterns using nationally representative datasets, including the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) (UNICEF, 2019), the Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey (BIHS) (IFPRI, 2020), and the Sample Vital Registration System (SVRS). Through this quantitative analysis, the research aims to detect shifts in prevalence and identify regions where child marriage remains most concentrated. Second, the study investigates the socio-cultural and economic determinants of child marriage, with particular attention to how families and communities exercise agency in resisting the practice. This includes examining the contextual factors that shape marriage decisions and the grassroots strategies employed to challenge normative pressures. Finally, the study assesses levels of awareness and the capacity of rural households and communities to prevent child marriage, offering insights into the potential for locally driven change and policy engagement.

The remainder of this paper is structured to guide the reader through a comprehensive exploration of child marriage in rural Bangladesh. Section 0 briefly reviews existing research and data, focusing on historical trends, parental perceptions, and socio-demographic characteristics that shape early marriage practices. Section 0 outlines the study's aims and objectives, establishing the analytical framework and guiding questions. Section 0 details the research design, including the mixed-methods approach, data sources, and ethical considerations. Section 0 presents the findings and discussion, integrating quantitative and qualitative insights to illuminate the drivers, patterns, and lived experiences of child marriage. The paper concludes in

Section 0 with a synthesis of key insights and reflections on future research and advocacy directions.

## 2. Literature Review

Child marriage constitutes a profound structural challenge in Bangladesh, impeding the fulfillment of fundamental human rights and obstructing progress toward national development targets, including Sustainable Development Goal 5.3. This review centers on rural Bangladesh, where the incidence of child marriage is significantly higher than in urban settings (Iris Group, 2020). Girls living in non-urban areas face a 10% greater likelihood of marrying early compared to their urban peers. Consequently, much of the analytical literature either focuses explicitly on rural contexts or draws from nationally representative samples that disproportionately reflect rural realities (UNICEF, 2025). While this emphasis is necessary, it reveals a comparative research gap in highly vulnerable non-rural environments—such as Dhaka slums and refugee camps—where drivers like insecurity diverge from typical rural pressures. However, a nuanced understanding of rural dynamics remains essential, as these communities continue to bear the heaviest burden and are central to any meaningful intervention strategy.

Multiple rounds of DHS survey data reveal a general decline in the age at marriage in Bangladesh since the 1990s, particularly among girls marrying before age 15 and 18 (UNICEF, 2025). Yet, this downward trend has been uneven, with signs of stagnation linked to external disruptions and inconsistent policy implementation. National-level progress masks deep disparities, indicating that the benefits of development have not been equitably distributed. Advancements are most evident among women with higher education and wealth, while structurally disadvantaged groups—especially the rural poor—continue to face barriers. The rural landscape harbors a significantly greater burden; while the national prevalence stands at 50.7%, the urban prevalence is 44.9% (The Child Marriage Data Portal, 2025). This gap is exacerbated by socio-economic stratification, with women in the poorest wealth quintile exhibiting a prevalence of 64.1%, and those with no formal schooling registering 65.3% (The Child Marriage Data Portal, 2025).

Educational attainment emerges as the most potent protective factor. Higher educated women show an adjusted prevalence ratio (aPR) of 0.45 compared to women with less education, meaning education reduces the risk of early marriage by over half (Billah *et al.*, 2023). While poverty is associated with child marriage, the magnitude of the educational effect demonstrates that keeping girls enrolled in school is the most effective policy lever for reduction (Billah *et al.*, 2023). Education alters a girl's agency, delays societal expectations of maturity, and increases parental awareness of health and legal consequences (Islam *et al.*, 2025). This explains why education is structurally superior to generalized income support alone. Prevalence rates also exhibit substantial geographical variation. High-prevalence clusters are concentrated in rural divisions like Rajshahi (63.7%), Rangpur (57.7%), and Barishal (56%), while Sylhet stands as a comparative cold spot at 23.2% (UNICEF, 2025). This divergence confirms that prevalence is driven by localized factors, whether cultural rigidity, climate vulnerability, or governance failures. Additionally, acute crises like the COVID-19 pandemic undermined safety nets; between April and October 2020, at

least 13,886 girls were subjected to child marriage, illustrating how the erosion of education exposes girls to vulnerability (Ain o Salish Kendra, 2023).

Underlying these trends, gender inequality remains a structural force shaping perceptions of girls as economic and social burdens (Iris Group, 2020). This view sustains acceptance of the practice, with 27.0% of parents and 25.8% of adolescents expressing support (Islam *et al.*, 2025). Immediate drivers such as anxiety over family honor play a decisive role. Social norms exert pressure on mothers, who often fear their daughters facing sexual harassment or reputational harm. Consequently, child marriage becomes a risk-averse response to perceived threats rather than a strategic choice (Islam *et al.*, 2025). Climate change acts as a ‘threat multiplier,’ intensifying these vulnerabilities (Iris Group, 2020). Increased weather variability correlates with a heightened likelihood of early marriage in rural areas, operating through agricultural income disruption (Tsaneva, 2020). During sudden-onset disasters like flooding, parental fears regarding sexual violence escalate, prompting early marriage as a survival strategy to mitigate reputational and financial risk. Religious leaders and marriage registrars also hold authority, with some citing interpretations that permit child marriage if the child is ‘mentally prepared,’ though no single religion is the primary driver (Islam *et al.*, 2025).

The legal landscape offers a complex backdrop. The Child Marriage Restraint Act (CMRA) of 2017 was introduced to bolster safeguards but contains a critical ‘special provision’ loophole (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2018). This clause permits underage marriage in ‘special circumstances,’ which is frequently exploited to legitimize marriages prompted by coercive situations like pre-marital pregnancy (Ferdous *et al.*, 2019). This compromises the law’s deterrent capacity and reinforces regressive norms (Ramadhani *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, the CMRA fails to address its supremacy over conflicting personal laws, creating interpretive ambiguity (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2018). In rural contexts, traditional justice systems like Salish often override statutory authority, and local institutional capacity is weakened by resource shortages (Ain o Salish Kendra, 2023; Haar & Duncan, 2023). Harsher penalties have also triggered backlash, with some families accelerating marriages to circumvent new constraints (Amirapu *et al.*, 2024).

Intervention strategies have yielded mixed results. Conditional economic incentives, such as cooking oil ration cards conditioned on delaying marriage, have proven effective, leading to a 4.9 percentage point reduction in early marriage by shifting the short-term economic calculus (Buchmann *et al.*, 2023). These programs also increased school enrollment without negatively affecting dowry or marriage quality. In contrast, adolescent empowerment programs focusing on life skills showed limited impact when implemented in isolation and paradoxically increased dowry demands by raising the transactional costs of marriage (Buchmann *et al.*, 2023). This suggests that enhancing social capital without addressing economic constraints is insufficient. Comparative insights from South Asia, Africa, and Latin America reinforce that effective strategies must be multi-sectoral. In India and Ethiopia, successful interventions often combine economic incentives with community sensitization, though gains can be fragile without addressing patriarchal norms (Buchmann *et al.*, 2023).

Synthesizing these findings, the persistence of child marriage in rural Bangladesh results from converging vulnerabilities: gender inequality, poverty, and climate insecurity, reinforced by legal loopholes and weak enforcement. Critical gaps remain, particularly regarding the long-term impact of the CMRA's 'special provision' and the localized norms in high-prevalence regions like Rajshahi. Future research must focus on these areas to support transitions from temporary coping mechanisms to sustainable resilience.

### **3. Research and Objective**

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the national trend and explore parental and girls' perceptions regarding child marriage. Thus, gaining a deeper understanding of the causes and consequences of child marriage in rural Bangladesh. The specific objectives of this study are:

1. Analyzing the trends and patterns of child marriage in rural Bangladesh using nationally representative sample surveys.
2. Investigating socio-cultural and economic determinants of child marriage, with particular attention to how families and communities exercise agency in resisting the practice.
3. Assessing the levels of awareness and the capacity of rural households and communities to prevent child marriage, offering insights into the potential for locally driven change and policy engagement.

### **4. Methodology**

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to examine the trends, patterns, and underlying determinants of child marriage. Quantitative analysis is conducted using open-access microdata drawn from nationally representative sample surveys, enabling the identification of temporal and spatial patterns. To further isolate key influencing factors, the study employs regression techniques. Complementing this, qualitative methods—including in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions—are utilized to assess the awareness, perceptions, and preventive capacities of rural households and communities in relation to child marriage.

#### **4.1 National Representative Sample Surveys**

This study draws on three nationally representative sample surveys to inform its analysis. First, it utilizes multiple rounds of the Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics (SVRS) survey, an initiative of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) designed to generate accurate and timely demographic data. The SVRS system tracks vital events—including births, deaths, marriages, and migrations—and produces key indicators such as the Annual Natural Growth Rate (NGR), Crude Birth Rate (CBR), Crude Death Rate (CDR), Total Fertility Rate (TFR), Infant Mortality Rate (IMR), Under-Five Mortality Rate (U5MR), and Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR).

Second, the study incorporates data from the Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey (BIHS) 2018–2019, the third round of this comprehensive national survey conducted by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). BIHS provides granular data on plot-level agricultural production, household dietary intake,

anthropometric measurements, and women's empowerment in agriculture, as measured by the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI). Covering 5,604 households across 325 primary sampling units, the survey offers statistically representative insights for rural Bangladesh and each of the seven administrative divisions: Barisal, Chittagong, Dhaka, Khulna, Rajshahi, Rangpur, and Sylhet.

Third, the study employs data from the 2019 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), conducted by BBS in collaboration with UNICEF Bangladesh as part of the Global MICS Programme. This survey collected data from 61,242 households across all 64 districts, providing a robust and internationally comparable dataset on indicators related to the health, education, and well-being of children and women, and tracking national progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

#### 4.2 Estimation Strategies

To achieve the research objectives of this study, we estimate following regression model -

$$Y_{ij} = \alpha_{ij} + \gamma' X_{ij} + C_j + \varepsilon_{ij} \dots [1]$$

here,  $Y_{ij}$  is the dummy variables that takes a value of '1' if  $i$ -th individual from  $j$ -th community is married before reaching the age of 18; or '0' otherwise.  $X$  is the vector of potential factors that may lead to child marriage, which includes - education in years, literacy level, food insecurity index, household size, household decision maker, natural logarithm of monthly household income, religion of the household, etc.  $C_j$  is the community fixed effect and  $\varepsilon_{ij}$  is the residual. We also used sampling weights in all estimations.

#### 4.3 Qualitative methods

The qualitative component of this study was conducted across ten selected locations in Bangladesh. Site selection followed a purposive sampling strategy, guided by four key criteria: varying levels of child marriage prevalence (high and low), poverty rates (high and low), educational attainment (high and low), and accessibility to households outside formal program membership. A summary of the study design and the distribution of research activities is presented in

Table 1. Household interviews were conducted individually at respondents' residences, involving both parents and the adolescent girl. In contrast, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held in accessible community venues within each study area, selected for convenience and participant comfort.

**Table 1:** Number of participants, by area, by type of survey

SL	District	Upazila	Interviews		FGDs	
			Households	Early-married Couples	Adult	Adolescent
1	Cumilla	Chandina	2	-	1	1
2	Noakhali	Subarnachar	2	-	1	1

3	Khulna	Dumuria	3	-	1	1
4	Kushtia	Kumarkhali	2	1	1	1
5	Tangail	Dhanbari	3	-	1	1
6	Sirajganj	Royganj	3	-	1	1
7	Rangpur	Pirganj	2	-	1	1
8	Gaibandha	Saghatta	1	-	1	1
9	Dinajpur	Khansama	3	-	1	1
10	Natore	Lalpur	2	2	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>

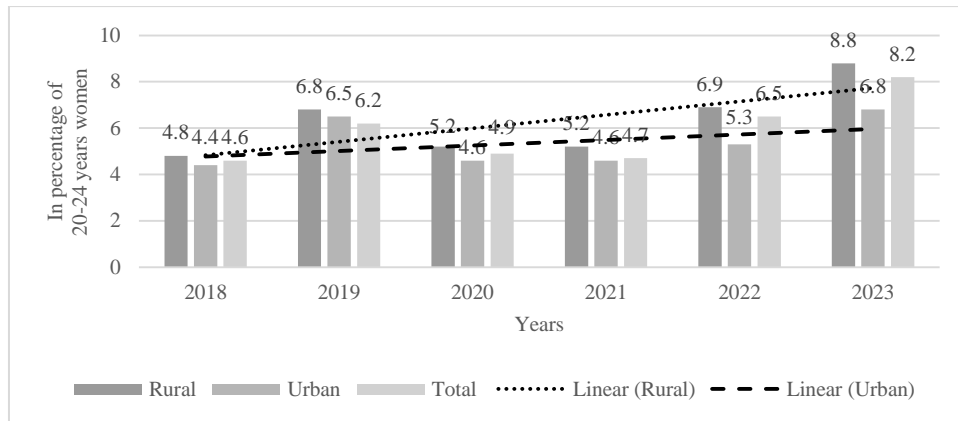
This study employs both Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews to foreground participants' voices in understanding the recent patterns, drivers, and consequences of child marriage. Interview recordings were carefully reviewed, and transcripts were produced by the research team using a combination of verbatim transcription and context-sensitive translation. In cases where participants were reluctant to be recorded, the Principal Investigator documented their narratives through detailed note-taking. All qualitative data—including FGDs, interview transcripts, and field notes—were analyzed thematically to construct a grounded understanding of the current landscape of child marriage in rural Bangladesh.

## 5. Analysis and Findings

This section presents the key findings of the study, integrating both quantitative and qualitative evidence to ensure coherence and readability. The results are organized thematically across several subsections. It begins with an overview of the historical trends in child marriage, followed by a spatial analysis of early marriage and age at first childbirth across districts. Subsequent subsection explores parental motivations surrounding child marriage, as well as the socio-economic and cultural factors associated with its persistence. The section concludes with insights drawn from qualitative interviews and Focus Group Discussions, offering a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences and community-level dynamics that shape child marriage in rural Bangladesh.

### 5.1 Historical Trend of Child Marriage

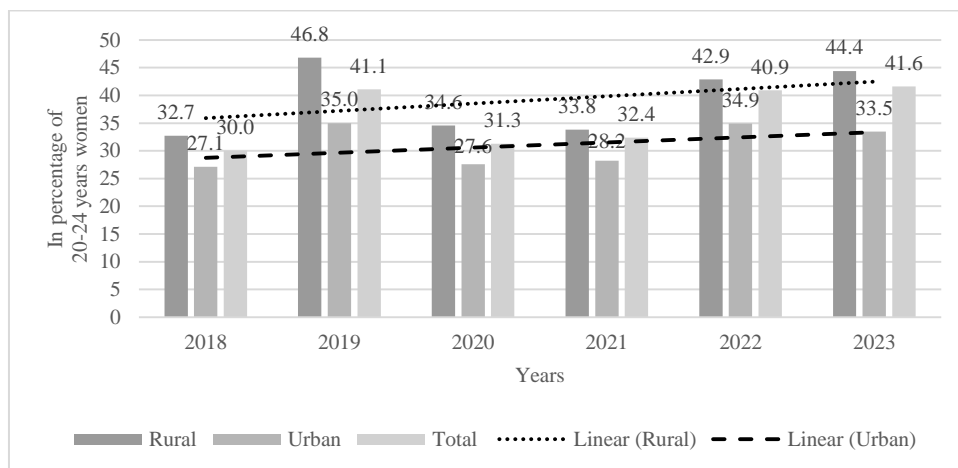
Figure 1 presents the proportion of women aged 20–24 who were married before the age of 15, based on data from the Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics (BSVS). The figure also depicts a linear trend spanning 2018 to 2023, disaggregated by rural and urban populations. Notably, while both rural and urban samples began at comparable levels in 2018, the rural trajectory demonstrates a more pronounced upward trend over time, indicating a widening disparity in early marriage prevalence between these settings.



**Figure 1:** Marriage before the age of 15

Source: Author’s estimation using Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics, BBS, GoB.

Similarly, Figure 2 illustrates the percentage of women aged 20–24 who were married before the age of 18, based on data from the same nationally representative dataset. The figure reveals a modest upward trend in early marriage rates across both rural and urban populations. Notably, the prevalence of marriage before age 15 has increased more sharply in rural areas compared to urban counterparts, mirroring a similar pattern for pre-18 marriages. Between 2018 and 2023, the proportion of women married before age 15 rose from 4.2% to 8.2%, while the rate of marriage before age 18 increased from 30.0% to 41.6%. This rising trend—particularly the increase in very early marriages—raises serious concerns. Early marriage is closely linked to a range of adverse outcomes, including heightened health risks such as maternal mortality, obstetric complications, and early pregnancy. It also severely restricts girls’ access to education and economic opportunities, reinforcing intergenerational cycles of poverty and deepening gender inequality. The psychological toll and long-term economic consequences further compound these challenges.



**Figure 2:** Marriage before the age of 18

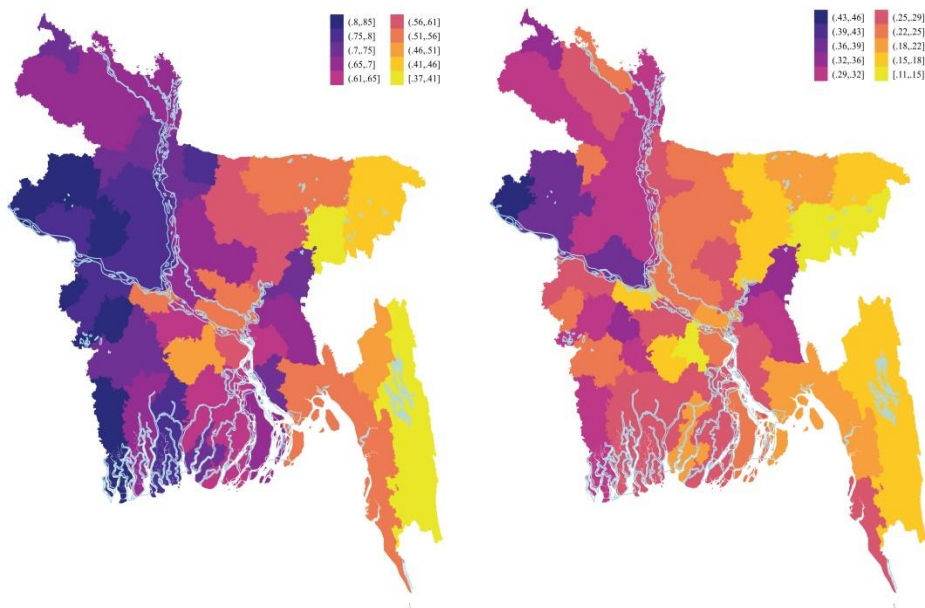
Source: Author’s estimation using Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics, BBS, GoB.

## 5.2 Women's Marriage and Childbirth Age in Bangladesh

The figures presented below depict district-level variations in two key indicators: Panel A shows the percentage of women who were married before the age of 18, while Panel B illustrates the percentage of women who experienced their first childbirth before turning 18. These statistics are derived from the MICS 2019 (UNICEF, 2019), conducted in Bangladesh.

The correlation coefficient between the two maps stands at 79.6%, indicating a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between child marriage and early childbirth at the 5% significance level. This robust association underscores the interconnected nature of these phenomena in rural Bangladesh. Early childbirth presents serious health risks for adolescent girls, whose bodies are often not physiologically prepared for pregnancy and delivery. Such risks include obstetric fistula, premature birth, and elevated rates of maternal mortality (Patoari, 2020). Beyond health implications, early motherhood severely limits educational attainment and economic mobility, reinforcing cycles of poverty and deepening gender inequality (Malé & Wodon, 2016). The strength of this correlation highlights the critical importance of targeted interventions to prevent child marriage as a means of protecting the health, rights, and future opportunities of young women. Addressing child marriage is not only a matter of legal reform but also a public health and development imperative for communities most affected by these intersecting vulnerabilities.

**Panel A: Rate of marriage before 18**      **Panel B: Rate of first Childbirth before 18**



**Figure 3: Marriage and first childbirth before 18**  
Source: Author's estimation using MICS 2019 (UNICEF).

### 5.3 Parental Motivations for Child Marriage

The following

Table 2 focuses on the reasons of why girls under the age of 18 get married in Bangladesh, as reported rural women who are currently under the age of 31 and were married before 18. The data is sourced from BIHS 2018-19 (IFPRI, 2020) and divided based on whether these women are currently living with their husbands or have left the marriage due to separation, divorce, or death.

**Table 2:** Common reasons behind girls' early (U18) marriage, by marital status

Reasons	% of Respondents	
	Still married & living with husband	Returned permanently after separation, divorce or death of husband
Percentage of girls get married before 18	53.98%	59.39%
Reasons are –		
She was harassed by local boys/men	1.92%	0.36%
Out of fear of harassment by boys/men	3.47%	1.80%
Thought the groom was very good and they might not get such a good choice again	42.28%	42.60%
Marriage proposals were coming for her	20.00%	20.04%
The girl herself wanted to marry	6.23%	8.91%
If the girl gets more education, it will be difficult to find her equally or more educated groom	1.44%	0.36%
If the girl gets more education, then parents might have to pay higher dowry to find her a good match	0.24%	0.14%
If the girl gets older, then parents might have to pay higher dowry to find her a good match	2.51%	2.95%
Pressure from relatives	3.11%	3.81%
Pressure from neighbors	2.04%	1.58%
Economic condition was poor to support her (food, education, clothing etc.)	14.97%	15.30%

Source: BIHS 2018-19.

The primary reason for child marriage, regardless of marital status, was that the family believed the groom was a good match and they might not find someone as

good again (around 42.0%). The second most common reason was that marriage proposals were coming for the girl (around 20.0%). The third most common reason was the poor economic condition of the family (around 15.0%). Note that the poor economic condition may interact with and contribute to others reasons behind the child marriage. Other factors included the girl's desire to marry, concerns about dowry and finding a suitable match if the girl continued her education, and pressure from relatives and neighbours. Sexual harassment by local boys/men was cited as a reason for child marriage by a small percentage of the respondents. Overall, the data suggests that child marriage decision marry is often driven by the social and economic considerations, with a focus on securing what is perceived to be a 'good marriage' for the girl.

A significant observation is that a comparable proportion of women from both the still married and separated groups were married before the age of 18, with percentages being 54.0% and 59.4% respectively. In rural areas, there exists a common belief that delaying marriage can lead to various marital issues and make it challenging to find a suitable match. However, this perception is evidently unfounded, as child marriages do not necessarily result in different outcomes.

#### **5.4 Factors Associated with Child Marriage**

This section discusses the key factors associated with child marriage in rural Bangladesh. The qualitative findings of this study suggests that child marriage is complex issue that cannot be attributed to a single cause, but rather a web of interconnected factors (Hanmer & Elefante, 2016; Parsons & McCleary-Sills, 2014). As evidenced in our analysis, traditional gender norms remain the dominant driving force behind child marriage in rural Bangladesh (Naved *et al.*, 2017; Yount *et al.*, 2016). However, a new trend of elopement and child marriage has emerged with the increased access to ICT and this trend has been repeatedly highlighted in their discussion by the adult and adolescent FGDs. Other broad factors of child marriage include: families' financial hardship, lack of parental and adolescent awareness, persuasion by the local matchmakers, birth certificate falsification by the local government authorities, and the religious beliefs and practices in rural areas. As mentioned earlier, these factors intersect and reinforce one another, perpetuating the practice of child marriage.

#### **5.5 Socio-demographic Information of Household**

Again, using BIHS 2018-19 nationally rural representative sample, we have estimated the following Table 3, which provides a detailed socio-demographic analysis of currently married women and under the age of 31 during the survey round. The data specifically compares those who were married before the legal age of 18 (child marriage) with those who were married after 18 (adult marriage). The women are further categorized based on their current marital status: those who are still married and living with their husband and those who have returned to their natal family permanently due to separation, divorce, or widowhood.

**Table 3:** Socio-demographic information of currently married women, under the age of 31

Particulars	Still married & living with husband		Returned permanently after separation, divorce or death of husband	
	Married before 18	Married after 18	Married before 18	Married after 18
Bride's age	15.66	19.53	15.81	19.35
Age at menarche	12.60	12.74	12.73	12.86
Groom's age	23.51	25.99	22.84	25.61
Bride's current educational attainment (in years of schooling)	7.42	9.19	6.60	7.80
Bride's educational attainment at the time of her marriage (in years of schooling)	7.30	9.05	6.53	7.70
Groom's current educational attainment (in years of schooling)	7.01	8.35	5.61	6.66
Groom's educational attainment at the time of her marriage (in years of schooling)	7.09	8.31	5.63	6.67
Father's educational attainment (in years of schooling)	2.57	3.19	2.89	3.73
Mother's educational attainment (in years of schooling)	2.17	2.33	2.14	2.50
Number of brothers	1.57	1.86	1.78	1.87
Number of sisters	1.73	2.04	1.97	2.15
Dowry (amount in BDT)	64,390.65	85,564.25	53,683.75	70,483.02
Promised Mahr/Kabin (amount in BDT)	178,903.87	195,178.81	146,330.76	223,785.95
Mahr/Kabin paid at the time of marriage (amount in BDT)	29,643.33	36,126.06	19,662.29	32,874.35
Monthly household income	10,154.47	11,217.45	11,971.17	13,321.38

Source: BIHS 2018-19.

The data indicates a noticeable difference in the average age of marriage between women married before 18 and those married after 18. The average ages for women married before 18 were 15.7 and 15.8 years, while those married after 18 had average ages of 19.5 and 19.4 years. This underscores the significantly low age at which child marriages occur, highlighting its prevalence in the former group. Additionally, the average age at menarche was slightly lower for those married before 18, suggesting that girls married younger may experience earlier physical maturation.

Educational attainment was significantly lower among brides married before 18, as well as their grooms and parents, indicating that child marriage often disrupts education and limits opportunities for personal and economic development. Child marriage is more prevalent in households with lower levels of parental education. Furthermore, dowry and promised Mahr/Kabin amounts were generally lower for brides married before 18, although the proportion paid at the time of marriage was higher, possibly reflecting the economic vulnerability of families marrying off their

daughters at a young age. The monthly household income was considerably lower for families where the bride was married before 18, indicating a correlation between child marriage and lower socioeconomic status and limited economic opportunities.

## 5.6 Regression Results

In

Table 4 reports the outcomes of the regression analysis conducted using Equation 1. In this specification, the dependent variable is a dummy coded as 1 for households with any occurrence of child marriage (i.e., marriage before age 18), and 0 otherwise. A number of factors are analysed, those are – parents' education [recoded the categorical variable as number of years of schooling], age when first menarche [in years], monthly household income [natural logarithm of monthly income], food security index [sum of eight dummy variables related to food security. These eight variables take value of '1' if the household faced any insecurity in the past 12 months.], female decision maker [dummy variable – '1' if the household led by a female household head], number of siblings, and religion [dummy variable – '1' if Islam].

**Table 4:** Associations Between Key Factors and Child Marriage

	(1) OLS	(2) Probit	(3) Logit
Mother's education in years of schooling	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.03)
Father's education in years of schooling	-0.01*** (0.00)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.06*** (0.02)
Age at menarche	-0.03* (0.02)	-0.10** (0.05)	-0.16* (0.09)
Dowry	-0.00*** (0.00)	-0.00*** (0.00)	-0.00*** (0.00)
Monthly HH income (ln)	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.03)
Food insecurity index (0 to 8)	0.01* (0.01)	0.05* (0.02)	0.08* (0.04)
Female decision maker (1 if women)	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.12)	-0.00 (0.21)
Number of brothers (at the time of marriage)	-0.03*** (0.01)	-0.11*** (0.04)	-0.18*** (0.06)
Number of sisters (at the time of	-0.01	-0.04	-0.07

marriage)	(0.01)	(0.03)	(0.06)
Religion (1 if Islam)	0.14**	0.44**	0.70**
	(0.06)	(0.19)	(0.32)
Constant	0.69*	0.92	1.43
	(0.38)	(1.04)	(1.77)
Observations	1547	1316	1316
R-squared	0.33	0.18	0.18

Note: This table exhibits estimates of the OLS, Probit and Logit models. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Community fixed effects and sampling weights are used in all regressions. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ .

The results show that mother's education shows no statistically significant association across models, while father's education consistently exhibits a strong and negative relationship with the likelihood of child marriage—suggesting that each additional year of paternal schooling significantly reduces the probability of early marriage for daughters. This disparity reflects the gendered structure of authority and decision-making in patriarchal households. In many rural Bangladeshi contexts, fathers often serve as the primary decision-makers in matters of marriage, finance, and family reputation. Educated fathers may be more aware of the legal, health, and socioeconomic risks associated with child marriage, and more inclined to delay marriage in favor of education or better prospects. Their schooling may also correlate with higher income and social capital, enabling them to resist normative pressures and afford the costs of later marriage. In contrast, mothers—despite their proximity to daughters and emotional investment—often lack formal authority in marital decisions. Even when educated, their influence may be constrained by entrenched gender norms that prioritize male control over household decisions. Thus, the muted effect of maternal education does not necessarily reflect indifference or lack of awareness, but rather the structural limitations imposed by patriarchal power dynamics.

Age at menarche is negatively associated with child marriage, indicating that girls who experience later onset of menstruation are less likely to marry early. This relationship is statistically significant at the 10% level in the OLS and Logit models, and at the 5% level in the Probit model, with increasingly negative coefficients across the three specifications.

The variable dowry shows a small but highly significant negative association with child marriage in all models. Although the coefficients are close to zero, their statistical significance ( $p < 0.01$ ) suggests that households where dowry is practiced may be less likely to engage in child marriage. One plausible explanation is that families who marry off their daughters at a younger age may negotiate lower dowry payments, either due to bargaining power or because early marriage itself is perceived as a trade-off that offsets higher dowry demands. Conversely, families with greater economic capacity—who can afford higher dowries—may also be more likely to delay marriage, prioritizing education or better marriage matches. In this

sense, dowry may serve as a proxy for household wealth, and the negative association could reflect the protective effect of higher income rather than dowry per se. Additionally, food insecurity—related to income—measured on a scale from 0 to 8, is positively and significantly associated with child marriage across all models. This suggests that households facing greater food insecurity are more likely to marry off children early, possibly as a coping strategy.

The presence of a female decision maker in the household does not show a significant effect, indicating that women’s formal decision-making roles may not directly influence child marriage outcomes. Similarly, the number of sisters at the time of marriage is not significantly associated with child marriage, while the number of brothers shows a strong and significant negative relationship. Households with more brothers are less likely to report child marriage, which may reflect protective social dynamics or resource distribution patterns. Finally, religion, coded as 1 for Muslim households, is positively and significantly associated with child marriage. The coefficients increase across the models—0.14 in OLS, 0.44 in Probit, and 0.70 in Logit—suggesting that religious affiliation may be linked to higher rates of early marriage, though the table does not explore underlying mechanisms.

These findings have clear implications for intervention design. Reproductive health education that addresses biological maturity and social expectations could also help delay marriage. Economic interventions such as food assistance, conditional cash transfers, or livelihood support should target food-insecure households to reduce the economic pressures that drive early marriage. Programs that engage brothers as allies in delaying marriage could be particularly effective, while efforts to empower female decision-makers may require deeper structural support to yield measurable change.

Importantly, culturally sensitive engagement is essential. Collaborating with religious leaders and institutions to promote child protection within faith-based frameworks could help shift norms around early marriage. Messaging that aligns with religious values while advocating for delayed marriage may be more effective than purely legal or rights-based approaches. Together, these strategies offer a multidimensional roadmap for reducing child marriage through targeted, evidence-based interventions.

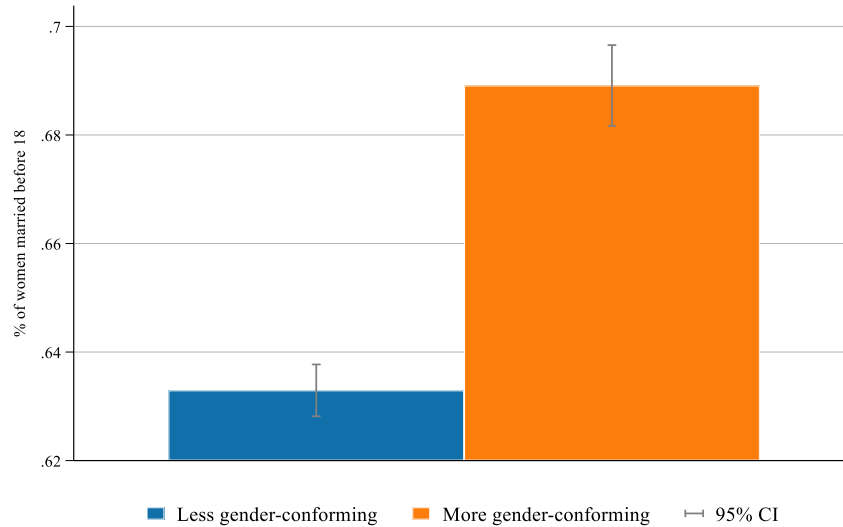
### **5.7 Traditional Gender Norms and Child Marriage**

Despite various efforts and intervention of government and NGOs, these entrenched gender norms remain a significant barrier to eradicating child marriage. In MICS 2019 data, there were five dichotomous questions related to traditional gender norm. Such as, ‘Is it justified for a husband to beat his wife if she neglects their children?’ or ‘Is it justified for a husband to beat his wife if she argues with him?’. We recreated a new ‘gender-conforming’ variable that takes value of ‘1’ if any women answer ‘yes’ to any of these five questions, and ‘0’ otherwise. Then we compare mean percentage of child marriage over this ‘gender-conforming’ variable. Result is exhibited in Figure 4. This figure confirm that child marriage is more prevalent in households that conform more strongly to traditional gender norms. These mean differences are statistically significant as indicated by the 95.0% confidence interval bars. Note that this relationship is not causal, but confirms common understanding about the relationship between gender norms and child marriage.

These norms are often rooted in gendered myth that dictate women's traditional role in society, emphasizing 'marriage' and 'motherhood' over educational attainment, paid employment and personal development. One such myth is the belief that a girl's 'beauty' and 'value' are closely tied to her 'youth', leading families to marry off their daughters before or immediately after they reach their puberty (Khoja-Moolji, 2015; Rozario, 2020).

Another gendered myth prevalent in rural Bangladesh is that certain health problems faced by the adolescent girls can be resolved through marriage and childbirth (Alam *et al.*, 2024). Despite increasing awareness among the parents, families are often compelled to marry off their daughters at an early age to avoid social scrutiny and negative comments. In the rural areas, when the girls reach puberty or begin to 'grow physically' in adolescence, they experience increased attention and gossip, leading to a sense of urgency among parents to arrange a child marriage (Efevbera *et al.*, 2017).

In the rural areas, families also feel pressured to marry off their daughters at an early age to avoid social stigma attached to sexual harassment (Nahar *et al.*, 2013). Our FGD participants discussed that when a girl experiences sexual harassment, she often faces severe stigma and labelling from her community. To avoid this 'social disgrace' and to 'protect' the girl from further harassment, families resort to child marriage. This response is driven by the gendered belief that marriage will restore the girl's 'honour' and her family's dignity (Akter *et al.*, 2022). While discussing this topic, majority of the participants emphasized that this experience is particularly common for the young girls from lower income families (Feldman, 2001; Kabeer, 2024). In fact, majority of the respondents highlighted that traditional gender norms disproportionately impact the girls from poor families, exacerbating their vulnerability to practices like child marriage. This vulnerability further intensified if the girls are engaged in romantic relationship at a young age (Jones *et al.*, 2020). Because, girls experience stigma and social scrutiny if they are perceived to be in a romantic relationship outside of marriage. As a result, families arrange child marriages to 'protect' their daughters' reputations and thus adhere to gendered cultural norms.



**Figure 4:** Gender norms and child marriage

This disparity is rooted in deeply ingrained gender norms of patriarchal Bangladeshi society that place a higher value on ‘female chastity’ and ‘virtue’ (Chowdhury, 2004). Girls are often subjected to stricter scrutiny and are more likely to be blamed for engaging in romantic relationships, leading to greater social pressure and stigma. Consequently, the practice of child marriage is often considered as a means to control and protect girls’ reputations. In their discussion, the participants identified traditional gender norms as the root cause of child marriage in rural Bangladesh. It was interesting to learn that despite increased parental awareness of the harms of child marriage, when parents find a ‘suitable’ groom, they still prefer to marry off their daughters. As discussed by the participants, this practice is deeply rooted to the traditional gender norms where marriage is considered as an ‘inevitable’ milestone and as a means of economic security for girls (Efevbera & Bhabha, 2020). It is also evident that marrying off a daughter to an economically stable groom is perceived as way to ensure her economic and social security. This belief is also rooted in the gendered cultural expectations that a man will be the primary breadwinner and the protector of the families, while a woman’s role is confined to ‘wives’ and ‘mothers.’

### 5.8 Insights from Qualitative Analysis

The analysis explores the complex and interrelated factors driving child marriage in rural Bangladesh, even as some parental attitudes show signs of progress. While a growing number of parents express support for girls’ education and empowerment, deeply entrenched patriarchal norms continue to shape decisions around marriage. These traditional beliefs are now intersecting with newer challenges, including the influence of digital technology, economic hardship, and community-level pressures, creating a layered and evolving landscape of vulnerability.

One of the emerging drivers is the unsafe use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The widespread availability of smartphones and internet access—accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic—has exposed adolescents to early romantic

relationships, sexually explicit content, and online exploitation. In the absence of comprehensive sexual education and within a cultural context that stigmatizes premarital intimacy, many young couples view marriage as the only socially acceptable way to legitimize their relationships. This often results in impulsive, unequal unions or elopements. Moreover, digital blackmail—where boys threaten to release private photos or videos—can coerce girls into early marriage, driven by fears of reputational harm and the societal emphasis on female chastity and honour.

Economic pressures also play a significant role. Child marriage is disproportionately prevalent among families in the lowest income quartile, who often see it as a strategy to reduce the financial burden of raising and educating daughters. The dynamics of dowry further exacerbate this trend, as younger brides typically command lower dowry payments, making early marriage a more economically viable option. Although many poor parents aspire to educate their daughters, the high costs of schooling—coupled with corruption and nepotism in the distribution of government stipends—frequently push them toward child marriage as a perceived necessity.

A lack of awareness and emotional coercion adds another layer of complexity. Illiterate parents may not fully grasp the long-term consequences of child marriage, while adolescents themselves often lack adequate knowledge about its impact on their education, health, and future prospects. In some cases, adolescents in romantic relationships emotionally pressure their parents—through threats of self-harm or withdrawal—to arrange marriages, leaving families feeling trapped between concern for their children's safety and fear of social stigma.

Religious and community influences further reinforce the practice. Certain local religious leaders misinterpret religious texts to justify child marriage, claiming that girls are ready for marriage upon reaching puberty. These messages are disseminated through community gatherings and personal interactions, exerting pressure on families. The rise of conservative religious institutions, such as Qawmi Madrasas, and the spread of patriarchal ideologies via platforms like YouTube, have intensified resistance to women's empowerment, particularly among low-income households. Matchmakers also play a problematic role, promoting early marriage through misinformation and exploiting fears that delaying marriage will render girls undesirable.

Finally, governance failures contribute to the persistence of child marriage. Corruption among local Union Parishad officials—who falsify birth certificates in exchange for bribes—undermines legal safeguards and facilitates underage marriage. However, the study also notes the positive role of local administration, including police and Upazila Nirbahi Officers (UNOs), as well as government helplines, which are increasingly responsive and proactive in addressing the issue.

## **6. Conclusion**

Child marriage in rural Bangladesh remains a deeply rooted structural challenge, sustained by intersecting forces of gender inequality, economic vulnerability, and sociocultural norms. Despite modest progress in reducing its prevalence, the practice continues to undermine the rights, health, and futures of countless girls. This study

highlights how entrenched perceptions—such as viewing girls as economic liabilities or associating their worth with age—drive families to prioritize early marriage over education and empowerment. These decisions are often compounded by poverty, limited opportunities, and the influence of local actors who reinforce harmful norms, including matchmakers and religious leaders.

Building on the findings, the study offers a comprehensive set of policy recommendations that address both immediate and structural drivers of child marriage. These include capacity-building initiatives—such as gender equality training for local influencers, teacher education, and parental awareness campaigns—that aim to shift attitudes and strengthen protective norms. Youth engagement strategies, including peer education and digital advocacy, further amplify community voices and mobilize collective action.

Economic interventions are equally vital. Conditional cash transfers, vocational training, and career guidance offer families and girls tangible alternatives to early marriage, easing financial pressures and expanding future possibilities. These measures must be scaled and adapted to local contexts to ensure accessibility and impact.

Social and cultural transformation is another cornerstone. Celebrating positive role models, promoting girls' participation in sports and cultural activities, and creating safe spaces for adolescents can reshape community narratives and foster environments where girls thrive. Digital literacy and online safety initiatives are increasingly important, equipping youth with the tools to navigate modern risks and opportunities.

Health and well-being interventions—such as reproductive health education, access to healthcare, and mandatory pre-marriage counselling—address the immediate consequences of child marriage and promote informed decision-making. Meanwhile, multi-sectoral collaboration, including the digitalization of marriage records and integration with birth registration systems, strengthens enforcement and accountability. Partnerships between government, NGOs, and communities are essential to ensure cultural relevance, sustainability, and scale.

Finally, robust monitoring and evaluation systems are needed to track progress, assess impact, and refine strategies. Data-driven approaches will enable policymakers and practitioners to respond effectively to emerging challenges and build on successful interventions.

In sum, ending child marriage in rural Bangladesh requires a multi-pronged, context-sensitive approach that combines legal reform, economic support, social transformation, and community empowerment. By implementing these recommendations and sustaining collaborative efforts, Bangladesh can move closer to a future where every girl has the freedom, opportunity, and support to choose her path—free from coercion, discrimination, and premature marriage.

Future research could delve deeper into the impact of specific interventions, such as economic empowerment programs, comprehensive sex education and promotion of girls' sports, on child marriage rates. Longitudinal studies could track the long-term

effects of child marriage on individuals and communities, providing valuable insights for targeted interventions. Additionally, research could explore the role of men and boys in challenging gender norms and promoting gender equality within their communities.

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